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A HUSBAND FOR HOLLY


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A Husband for Holly

Jodi Thomas



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December 23, 1865

Texas

Luther Walters grumbled at his lifelong friend, Samuel Stone, as they pulled a flatbed wagon onto the loading dock at Bryan, Texas. The sun was just coming up and they'd been driving half of the night, leaving Luther in no mood to be sociable. "I'm still not sold on this idea for a present for Holly. Too many unpredictables in this kind of deal, Sam."

Stretching his back, Luther spat a long stream of brown liquid and continued, "If this ain't the most harebrained notion you've ever come up with, I hope my memory doesn't return enough to think of a worse one."

Samuel climbed carefully down from the wagon, favoring his left knee as always. He tossed the buffalo robe he'd used as a lap quilt into the back. "We agreed to get her something special, it being both Christmas and her twenty-first birthday." He pulled on the belt, which had insisted on sliding below his belly at every opportunity for more than fifty years. "So no use pondering what's done any longer."

"Yeah, but a husband?" Luther shouted remembering Sam's hearing problem. If we order our Holly a husband, she'll skin us both alive if she don't like him. What if he's a no-account?"

"Stop worrying about 'what if' when we ain't dealt with the here and now. Besides, if he could read the ad, the feller's one up on us." Samuel waved at the stationmaster. "Mornin', Seth, you notice a man climb off the train a few minutes ago?"

The station manager looked up at the two aging cowhands and smiled before pointing to the end of the platform. "He's the only soul who got off this morning. Been standing there watching the sun rise ever since."

Luther and Samuel looked down the empty dock. Standing alone waited a tall man wrapped in a wool coat. His Union blue hat was pinned up on one side in the manner of a cavalry officer, and finely tooled black saddlebags hung over one shoulder. His dark coat was pulled open to reveal a polished Army Colt strapped to his waist. Unlike the ragged Rebel boys they'd seen coming home, this soldier

looked as though his uniform was new from boot to brim.

Luther grabbed Samuel, as if they were about to take a step closer to the devil himself. "Sam! That can't be him."

Sam squinted hard into the morning sun trying to make out details of the thin stranger. "He's tall, just like his telegram said. Least we won't have to worry about Holly's kids being runts. Nice-looking feller, too, from what I can make out beneath that hat."

Luther didn't decrease his hold on Sam's arm. "But it can't be him!" The aging man was shaking his head so hard, his saggy chins fell a step behind the rest of his face. "He can't be Holly's present. That's a Yankee!"

Sam pulled free of his friend and moved forward. Being raised in the Oklahoma Territory, he'd never been as fond of marking a man by his birthplace as most. "Pardon me, mister?" Sam shouted as he hurried toward the officer before Luther could stop him. "You wouldn't be Zachary Hamilton, would you?"

The stranger turned toward the two men and nodded once without speaking. At first glance, he cut a handsome picture with his dark hair and blue-gray eyes. But as Sam got closer he saw more, far more, maybe even more than he wanted to see.

The stranger's eyes were puffy with sleeplessness, and his high cheekbones hollow with thinness. His mouth was tight, as if he hadn't smiled in years. His stare had the coldness of one who valued nothing, not even his own life. Sam had seen what war did to some men, but he hadn't expected to see such total loss of a belief in dreams in a young man wearing Union blue.

Sam slowly offered his hand. "Nice to meet you, Captain Hamilton. I'm Sam Stone." He glanced at his partner. "And this here is Luther Walters. We're mighty glad you answered our ad."

Before either of the men could react, the Union officer before them crumpled, as if he were made of damp paper. He hit the platform with a hard thud that seemed to echo off the station house.

Sam dropped to one knee and touched Hamilton's forehead. "He's burning up." The old man lifted the officer's shoulders. "We'd best get him home."

Luther picked up Zach's feet. "Great! Not only did we get Holly a damn Yankee for Christmas, we got her a dead, damn Yankee."

Sam struggled with the body as they moved toward the wagon. "Look on the bright side. If we can get her to marry him before he dies, she'll be a widow. You know how much higher widows are thought of around these parts than old maids."

Luther shook his head in agreement. "I told you from the first she wouldn't marry any man we had to order for her. She's got too much pride."

“Well, it’s too late to find her another Christmas present. We’ll have to go with this one.”

They tossed Zach onto the dirty buffalo hide in the wagon bed with the same care they loaded firewood. Sam wiped his forehead and thumbed toward the town’s only diner. “Might as well eat breakfast. It’ll take several hours to get him home. That is if he lives long enough for Holly to meet him.”

“Kill him is more like it.” Luther laughed. “If there ain’t a man in the state who can tame her, what hope does a sickly Yankee have?”

Sam agreed as they disappeared into the town’s only eating establishment.

Zachary Hamilton awakened slowly, one sense at a time, to the welcoming aroma of baked bread and freshly boiled coffee. He could feel the warmth of a fire crackling several feet away. A woman hummed softly from somewhere beyond the room. A feeling of being home blanketed Zach, and he didn't want to open his eyes. For the first time in years, he remembered a moment when he'd felt alive, when he thought there was good in the world. A time before the War Between the States, a time before the prison at Andersonville.

Slowly, he forced himself to open his eyes, even though he knew the dream might disappear once he came fully awake. Huge railroad cross ties formed the ceiling of the room he was in, giving him the impression that this home had been built to weather any storm.

His hand gripped the quilts covering him as his gaze moved around the rest of the room. The large bed he lay in was against one wall, surrounded by a menagerie of furniture. Large hand-cut wooden pieces mixed with thin-legged French pieces. Lace brushed against animal hides in this large house that seemed to be missing inside walls to separate one area from another. Two doors cut into each of the far walls. One, Zach guessed, would be to the kitchen; the other, judging by the bolt, must lead outside.

In the center of the room stood a table set for four, with dishes as mismatched as the room's furnishings.

The humming stopped abruptly. "Evenin'" came the clear sound of a woman's voice from the doorway leading into the kitchen.

Zach turned his gaze, but all words log-piled in his throat as he caught first sight of her. Leaning against the doorway was a young woman who seemed to belong in the room, for she was as mismatched as the china on the table. Her stance was wide, like a man's, with an old revolver strapped to her thigh, and pants three sizes too big belted at her waist. The white shirt she wore was drop-shoulder, making her slender build seem even smaller. Hair the color of a fiery golden sunset massed around her face and hugged her shoulders in a wild tumbling of softness.

She could be an angel or a devil, but one thing Zach knew: He'd never forget the sight of her. This woman was the kind to haunt a man's dreams.

With a sudden blast of cold air, the two men Zach had seen at the train station stormed through the outside door. Each was loaded down with branches of greenery.

The strange woman smiled warmly at the two old men, and motioned for them to take a seat at the table. Both men nodded toward Zach and took their chairs as the woman brought in a pot of coffee.

As she poured, she glanced toward Zach. "I told the boys I'd cook supper, then we'd see if you were dead." She moved toward him with a grace nature granted few women. Her slight smile told him she had no doubt he'd live. "Seeing as you're alive, I might as well introduce myself and offer you a cup. I'm Holly McCarter, and this has been my ranch since my father died six years ago."

Zach couldn't believe what he was hearing. He tried to remember how the ad he'd answered had read. Something about an old maid looking for a man to help her run a huge spread in Texas. He'd known at the time that the ad was no more than a strange advertisement for a husband, and he'd been just heartsick and drunk enough to answer it. But he must have been wrong; the woman before him would have no trouble finding a husband, and she was years away from being what he'd consider an old maid.

As Holly raised her hand to his forehead, their gazes met and Zach was hypnotized. Her eyes were evergreen. The color of the huge fir trees that grow deep in the forests of upstate New York. The color of peace.

"Everyone knows for a hundred miles around that there's always a meal offered on the McCarter spread," she said, "but we usually have our guests arrive conscious."

When Zach didn't reply, Holly glanced at the two old men filling their plates at the table. "He doesn't talk much, does he? Where did you two say you found him?"

Both Luther and Samuel seemed too preoccupied to answer, but Zach remembered his manners. "Pleased to meet you, Miss McCarter. I met your friends at the station this morning." When she looked confused, he hurried to explain, "You're nothing like I expected from the ad." How could he begin to tell her that he'd stayed drunk the entire train trip, dreading the sight of a woman who would have to put an ad in a paper to find a husband? How was he ever going to explain that he'd have sold his soul for a place where he could see the sun rise and set without a house in his line of sight? And she'd offered just such a place, for only the use of his name after hers.

Holly looked surprised. "Ad?"

She tossed her hair back over one shoulder in a way that made Zach's gut tighten suddenly. Her beauty made him ache for something

he'd never known he missed.

He glanced toward the two cowhands, but they didn't look his way. Both were shoveling down food as if they wouldn't get the chance to eat again for days. There was nothing left for Zach to do but face his future wife and iron out the details of their agreement. But he wouldn't do it without standing. He shoved his feet from beneath the covers, and was relieved to find his trousers still on. His feet hit his boots as he swung them off the bed.

Holly stood, none too patiently, as he pulled on his boots and coat. She knew something was up. She'd sensed it the moment she'd returned from the north pasture and found Sam and Luther tucking this stranger into her father's old bed, as though there were nowhere else on the ranch to put him. Luther and Samuel had been whispering for weeks, and they had disappeared entirely last night.

Now they were eating her cooking without complaint. Something they hadn't done in years.

She studied the stranger as he finished dressing. Despite his thinness, he wasn't bad looking. It was not so much that his features were perfect, but more that there was strength molded into his every bone. She could see it in the determined set of his jaw and the rigidity of his back. She might have found him handsome, if he hadn't been a Yankee.

He faced her with the stance of a seasoned soldier. "I'm Zachary Hamilton, and I believe I meet the qualifications in your ad. Before the war, I was a veterinarian by education, so that should cover the part about knowing horses and cattle. I'm under thirty, single, have all my teeth, and can read."

Holly's eyes darkened to indigo green. "What ad?" This time she turned her question to the two old men. "Either this man is crazy, or you two have been up to something."

Samuel and Luther jumped from their chairs and put the table between themselves and Holly, as if her question had been punctuated with war drums.

"Now, Holly"—Luther wiped his mouth with his sleeve—"don't go gettin' mad. We didn't just find him, we sent for him. Thought it was a good idea. How was we to know the only man who answered the ad would be a Yankee?"

Samuel's head was bobbing in agreement. "We just wanted to get you something special for Christmas. And the war's over. And he don't look so bad if we could fatten him up a little. And . . ."

Holly advanced slowly toward the two men. "Are you two trying to tell me you *ordered* this man for me?"

Zach couldn't help but laugh aloud. How could these two men possibly be afraid of such a slip of a girl? It was almost as ridiculous

as the idea that they'd gotten her a husband for a gift.

To his surprise, the woman turned on him. "Stop laughing!" she demanded with eyes shining in anger. "I'll deal with you when I'm finished with these two."

Luther moved a step closer. "We can't take him back now. There's not another train until after Christmas."

Holly pressed her lips together until they disappeared. "How could you?" she asked so quietly, both men looked even more nervous. "How could the two of you place an ad for a husband? Did you think anyone who answered would be acceptable, like ordering a sack of flour?"

Sam saw his chance. "We thought we'd give it a try. After all, that's the way your dad found your mother, and a sweeter little French lady never lived. Luther and me figured it was worth another shot. Thought you might like the idea, 'cause there ain't a man in these parts to suit your fancy."

Luther nodded. "He ain't bad. He can even read, so the two of you can talk about those books you like."

"Did it ever occur to either of you that I might want to pick my own husband?" Her voice might have been calm, but her fists were planted firmly on her hips. "And when and if I do, it won't be a Northerner. I want no part of even inviting a Yankee onto my property."

Luther didn't have an answer, so he fell back on the only tactic that worked when he had no ground to stand on. "Now, Holly, you know we promised your father we'd see after you like you was our own. You being motherless from birth. We did the best we—"

"Out!" Holly shouted. "Both of you!"

"But—"

"Out!" She moved toward them, and both men ran as if they could hear a rattler's tail shaking.

They were out the door and gone before Zach could control his laughter.

With a fiery whirl, Holly turned on him. "How dare you take advantage of two dear old men?"

"Me!" He could see the anger in her eyes and the tightness around her mouth. She would run him through if she had a blade, unless he explained. "All I've done, Miss McCarter, is answer an ad. I thought you knew about their plan."

"I knew nothing of any ad or plan." She moved closer, a little of the anger passing from her face as she realized he might be just as much a victim of the old men's plan. "Let me make one thing crystal clear, Mr. Hamilton. I want no husband ordered for me. If I did, I'd pick him from sturdy Texas stock, not the likes of you. The war's over,

so I'll grant you the McCarter hospitality—but nothing else. You must be as crazy as those two old men to think I'd go along with this."

Zach didn't defend himself. He couldn't tell her that he'd been starved in a Rebel prison camp for almost a year. Or that when he'd been last wounded in battle, he had caught a fever and had lain in the mud for three days waiting for death. "I assumed the agreement was tentative." He felt his muscles tighten in attention. "Pending on both parties' agreement."

"There was no agreement, Mr. Hamilton," she reminded him. "I'll have no part of being married to a man ordered for me by my two absentminded old godfathers."

He nodded once, understanding her clearly. "No agreement."

Anger passed from her like a summer storm, leaving her more beautiful. "I'll pay you for the train ticket back."

"That won't be necessary." He could sense her nervousness, and suddenly felt sorry for the lady. This must be embarrassing for her. "I'll have the men take me back to town immediately."

When he passed her heading toward the door, she didn't even come up to the top of his shoulder; however, he had a feeling there was little this lady couldn't do.

"No," she said, her voice finally calming to a normal tone. "Sam and Luther are too tired after being up all night, and you must be exhausted as well. You're welcome to stay the night, and I'll drive you back myself come morning."

"Thank you." Zach glanced at the one bed in the room. "But . . ."

Holly caught his unvoiced question. "I'll sleep in the loft. I do most nights anyway. My father would come back from his grave to haunt me if I didn't show a stranger, any stranger, the McCarter hospitality. It, like the Christmas Eve party tomorrow night, is something he always insisted upon no matter what else was happening."

A silence fell between them, as wide as a canyon. Zach wasn't accustomed to talking with women, and she wasn't one for small talk. Without a word, they sat down at the table and began to eat, both very much aware of the other.

He noticed her hands were small, but calloused across her palms from hard work.

She noticed his manners were impeccable, and his slight smile warmed her to her boots.

"I've more steak in the kitchen—if you're still hungry?" Holly asked as Zach finished off the last piece of meat on the platter. She'd never seen one man eat so much at one time.

He looked slightly guilty. "I'm sorry. Do I look like I'm starving? It's only that I haven't eaten a meal since I boarded the train. The food in the shacks along the stops didn't seem worth the time to run and get. Now, I can't get full."

Holly smiled. "Don't apologize. I'm the worst cook in the state, and watching you eat my cooking is a treat. Folks usually make up reasons why they can't eat another bite." She stood and picked up the empty platter. "How about I fry you a few eggs to go with the last of the meat?"

Zach wanted to be polite and say, "No, thank you," but the thought of fresh eggs was too much to turn down. He followed Holly into the huge kitchen, and watched as she overcooked a half dozen scrambled eggs. While he ate every bite, she began hanging the greenery around the room and tying tiny Christmas bells to each branch. Without making eye contact, they found it easier to talk of ordinary things, of safe topics. She told him the story of how her father had built the cabin of railroad ties that had washed downstream. He described the train ride west. There was no talk of marriage, or war, or of him staying.

Zach couldn't help watching her move with a grace about her no amount of men's clothing could ever hide. He could almost see what her parents must have been like. Her mother small and dainty, her father strong and capable. She'd inherited the best from both of them. He'd never met a woman like her. A woman who could take care of herself, and who didn't seem to need or want a man to lean on.

As he finished the last of the coffee, he said, "I'm truly sorry about the mix-up over the ad, but I'm not sorry I came to Texas. This open land looks like as good a place as any I've seen to start over."

Holly didn't respond, and he wondered if she'd heard. Finally, she climbed down from the chair she'd been using as a ladder and asked, "Why *did* you answer the ad, Mr. Hamilton?"

Her question was too direct to be answered any other way. "I don't know. I spent most of the war dreaming of going home, and when I

did there was nothing there for me. Even the woman I thought I loved didn't wait for me to return. So I took a few months leave before deciding whether to re-up, and then I tried to drink my troubles away. Not in the sloppy-town-drunk kind of way, but alone in one hotel room after another. Finally, I woke up one morning and didn't know what town I was in. I went downstairs, and there were strangers everywhere; no one I cared about or who even noticed me. So I bought a paper and ordered another bottle sent to my room. Before the bottle was delivered, I read your strange ad and decided any direction was better than the one in which I was headed."

Holly moved closer and sat down across from him as he continued, "I wanted a place away from people for a while." He couldn't tell a lady what it had been like in the Confederate prison camp with thousands of men on only a few acres. Just the smell had made most new prisoners sick for days. "I want to stand and watch the sun rise and set every day of my life without seeing people between me and the horizon."

Holly jumped to her feet, as if she were the very genie he'd called for. "Well, come on, Mr. Hamilton. If you're up to a little ride, I'll show you the sunset from the end of my spread before you leave. It's just like you want to see, nothing but nature to color the view."

"After that meal, I think I could use a little exercise." With food under his belt, he could almost believe he could do anything. Maybe if he started eating and sleeping regularly, the fever would stay at bay.

Zach grabbed his warm wool riding coat and headed toward the door. He wasn't surprised to see Holly pull a man's leather jacket from the peg. When he offered to help her put it on, she pulled away without a word.

They walked out of the house into the yard of the huge ranch. She yelled at one of the men to saddle two horses, then turned to Zach. "This is my world, Mr. Hamilton, We can ride about a mile west and watch the sunset along the breaks."

Zach looked around at the cluster of buildings. Bunkhouses, barns, well house, all cared for properly. The ranch was like a place he'd dreamed of for years. A place large enough and far enough away from others that it could be a little world unto itself.

Sam limped from the main bunkhouse so fast, he looked like a top about to spin. "Howdy, Captain." The old man smiled as though he was surprised to see the Yankee still alive. "I didn't hear any yelling coming from Holly's house, so I figured she'd either killed you or the two of you had made up."

"Don't get any ideas, Sam." Holly stepped between him and Zach. "We're just going for a ride. My Christmas present goes back to town tomorrow. And don't try to tell me you didn't hear me."

Sam looked disappointed. "Of course, Holly. If that's what you want."

"That's exactly what I want." A touch of anger colored her cheeks. "A husband for Christmas is about the worst idea you two have ever come up with."

A ranch hand led two horses from the barn, distracting her from any other comment. Zach moved to help Holly up, but again she skirted away from his touch. She swung into the saddle with ease atop a huge roan. "This is Cinnamon." The mane of the horse almost matched the color of Holly's hair. "I raised her from the time she first stood, and I'm the only one who rides her."

Zach nodded his approval of the horse and walked around her to the other mount. As he climbed into the saddle, his muscles strained from the lack of riding. Biting down hard on his bottom lip, he hid his discomfort.

"Have a nice ride." Sam smiled at them as if his mind were already moving on to another plan. "Some of the boys and I will carry in the Christmas tree while you're gone."

Holly kicked her horse into action. "You can ride, can't you, Yankee?"

"I can ride," Zach answered as he followed, praying he could keep up with the little lady.

They rode west at a gallop and after a short distance, Zach felt his body responding to the feel of the powerful animal moving beneath him. The exertion seemed to build his strength as they rode over the open country toward a long line of low cliffs she'd called breaks.

She reached them first and encouraged Cinnamon to follow the trail leading to the top. His horse followed, with Zach showing a little of the skill in horsemanship he'd learned in the cavalry.

As they reached the summit, the sun was just touching the horizon. Zach pulled up beside her, and watched as yellow gold spilled out across the land.

"It's fabulous!" he whispered. "The ground looks like it's on fire for miles."

"I know," she answered. "I've been riding to this spot most of my life to watch it. My dad told me the sun just drops from sight in the mountains where he grew up. One minute it's there, and the next, it's gone. But here the sun spreads out and puts on a show, as if it doesn't want to die. And after the sun disappears, the clouds still glow with its light, as though remembering the warmth for as long as possible."

Zach could never remember seeing such a magnificent sight. The thought that she could watch it daily almost made him jealous. "Thank you," he finally said, "for sharing your sunset with me."

"You're welcome," she answered, reluctantly turning her horse

back to the path toward home.

As they rode among the shadows, he finally broke the silence. "Why wouldn't you allow me to help you into the saddle back there? Or on with your coat in the cabin?"

"I'm not in the habit of having someone help me do anything."

Zach took a deep breath and dove into what he had to say. This wasn't a woman who'd give him a second chance, so he might as well be direct at his one try. "You know how you said your father had rules he followed, like hospitality and a Christmas Eve party?"

"Yes." She slowed her horse, intrigued.

"Well, where I come from, we have a few rules also. My mother was a fine woman, and she'd have had my hide if I didn't offer to assist a lady on or off a horse, or help a woman into her coat with the proper amount of manners."

"I'm not helpless," Holly started. "I'm able to . . ."

"Being able has nothing to do with it, Miss McCarter. It's a matter of custom, nothing more."

Holly was silent. No one had reminded her of her manners since her father died. Not Luther or Sam or anyone else around the place. Whatever she said was fact, and no one questioned her. She wasn't sure she liked this Zachary Hamilton, but she couldn't help being intrigued by the idea that he wasn't the least bit intimidated by her.

"I'll not be pampered." She raised her chin and looked straight ahead.

"I wouldn't dream of it." He couldn't seem to keep the corner of his mouth from lifting slightly. "But would you consider allowing me to pay you the common courtesy when we return, for my dear departed mother's sake?"

"I might." Holly kicked her horse. "If you're there when I reach the barn."

Zach was beside her in a heartbeat as they raced toward the barn's glowing lanterns.

Minutes later, Sam's smile reached all the way to the laugh lines around his eyes as he watched Holly slide from her saddle into Zach's waiting arms. They only touched for a moment, but Sam felt the earth shift in his world. He slapped Luther on the back, and suddenly decided that he believed in Christmas magic.

Holly watched Zach build the fire in the huge corner fireplace while she warmed milk for hot cocoa. He was not an easy man to read. He seemed to have enough pride for several men, yet he'd answered an ad to be anybody's husband. Since their ride, conversation had flowed calmly between them, light with laughter and flavored in honesty. He was, and always would be, a stranger she'd met for a few hours, but she felt she could learn from this proper Yankee with his good manners and true stare.

She didn't need a Gypsy palm reader to tell her something was wrong with her. She'd known it from the time she'd turned fifteen and Sam had dragged her to a barn raising and dance. Holly had wanted to giggle and whisper with the other girls, but she had had no idea what they were laughing about. If there was a barn to be built, it seemed more practical to grab a hammer and climb. The men at first had been shy around her, but by the time the barn was completed, they'd welcomed her as one of their own. Only, when the dance started, not a one welcomed her as a dance partner.

As Holly filled the cups with steaming cocoa, she made up her mind. She'd talk with this Zach Hamilton, and learn how she should act. It would be no great embarrassment, for he'd be gone tomorrow morning, and she'd never have to face him again.

"Thanks," he said, as he stood and took one of the mugs from her hand. "I don't remember the last time I had a cup of cocoa."

"It's one of the few things I fix that I don't burn." Holly tried to sound relaxed. She curled cross-legged on the floor in front of the fire. The smell of evergreen blended with the aroma of burning pinion. This house, this room was the only place Holly felt comfortable, and even tonight the stranger before her couldn't take away that feeling.

Zach took a sip. As the warm chocolate slid down his throat, he glanced around the room. "The men picked a fine Christmas tree. It's as high as the ceiling, yet not so wide that it takes up too much space. They must have worked all the time we were gone to get up the rest of the greenery. There's even mistletoe over every doorway."

Holly nodded, remembering how every year the hands took all the furniture out of the huge room and invited the neighbors over for Christmas Eve. The cook in the bunkhouse would make gingerbread,

apple turnovers, and taffy for the children. Most of the wives would bring other candies and cakes, until the kitchen table bulged with the banquet. "We'll decorate the tree with cookie stars and ribbon rings. There'll be lots of talking and laughing and even dancing tomorrow night in this room. It'll be days before I'll stop smelling evergreen and candles, but it's a McCarter custom dating back to when there were only a few families within traveling distance."

Zach relaxed in the chair close to the fire and crossed his long legs in front of him. "You'll dance all night with the many ranchers and cowhands from these parts?"

Holly knew her time of honesty had come. If she didn't tell him the truth now, she'd never get any instructions. She'd spend the rest of her life ranch talking with men and never know how to talk romance. "No." She lifted her head, as if daring him to laugh. "I don't own a dancing dress or know how to dance, even if I did. I learned a long time ago to only do things I'm good at. Dancing isn't one of them, so I'm satisfied to watch."

Zach leaned closer. The longing in her green eyes made a lie of what she said. "Would you like to learn?" he asked.

"You'd teach me?"

"For showing me your sunset, it's the least I can do." Zach stood and bowed low. "May I have the honor, Miss McCarter?"

Holly lifted her hand. "You may," she whispered, feeling more afraid than she had facing down wild mustangs. "If you promise not to tell anyone I'm wasting my time so foolishly."

"You have my word." His strong hand closed around hers and pulled her to her feet. Slowly, as if he were testing her seriousness, he moved in front of her. He lifted her left hand and placed it on his shoulder. "I'll count, and all you have to do is follow."

He counted to four over and over while they moved about the room, and Holly slowly relaxed. Dancing wasn't as hard as she'd thought it might be. His sure hand guided her and steadied her when she faltered.

"Why have you never danced before?" he asked without stopping. This might seem a foolishness to her, but it was pure pleasure to him. There'd been a time in his life when he'd never thought he'd hold a woman and dance again.

"No one ever asked me," she stated flatly, wishing she had another reason to give him.

"I find that hard to believe," Zach responded.

Suddenly Holly planted her feet wide and refused to move another step. "I'm not in the habit of lying, Yankee." Anger sparked inside her like lightning striking a dry prairie. No one in her life had ever even hinted that she might lie. She knew men in this country who would

kill someone for saying such a thing.

But Zach's anger rose to meet hers on equal ground. "And I'm not in the habit of being referred to constantly as 'Yankee.' Do you think you could use my name now and then when you're yelling at me, so I'll know you're mad at me and not the entire upper half of the country?" His voice was calm, but she had a feeling his wrath was just as deadly as her own.

Before either of them could move, the door swung open, and Sam hurried inside. "Wind's getting up, Holly, you want me to . . ." He froze at the sight of Holly in Zach's arms.

She pulled away from the stranger, trying to act as if her being in a man's arms was not the eighth wonder of the world Sam appeared to think it was. "We'd best move the horses into the corral by the barn. I don't want them spooking again."

"I'll help." Zach moved with her to their coats.

"No, Yank . . ." Holly hesitated. "Zach. I don't need a man helping who doesn't know his way around the grounds after dark. The corral can be tricky. You stay here. I'm capable of running a ranch, even if I can't dance."

She knew he would've argued if he'd known her better, but a guest on an unfamiliar ranch had no choice. She appreciated his offer. "Sam, you stay here, too. With that bad knee of yours, we're liable to be pulling you out of the mud."

"All right." Sam was already taking off his coat, as if he'd known he'd be staying behind. He touched his knee, which always seemed to give him trouble when any work appeared after sunset. "I need to talk with this here young fellow anyway."

Zach stood silent as he watched Holly pull on her coat. He could still feel her in his arms, and her fresh smell lingered, if only in his mind. He wanted to stop her, but he knew she was doing what she did every day of her life—the only thing she seemed to feel comfortable doing: being a rancher.

When Zach finally turned back to the fire, Sam had made himself comfortable in the only chair. "I know what you're going to say, old man, and there's no need." Zach wanted to make it clear to Sam before the old guy started giving him warnings and threats. "I realize I'll be sleeping under the same roof as Holly, but I assure you I'm a gentleman, and she has nothing to fear."

Sam hooted with laughter so loud, Zach was worried about the man's sanity. When finally he quieted down, Sam shouted, "Son, it wasn't Holly's safety I was worried about; it was yours! You can bet that if you do anything to displease her, she'll have you tied to the hitching post come morning."

Sam shifted the tobacco in his mouth and looked toward the door.

"I best get going." He shoved himself from the chair. "Consider yourself warned. Don't dance with the devil's daughter unless you can take the heat." He slapped Zach on the back like he probably wouldn't see the man alive again.

As the door slammed behind the old man, Zach folded into the chair and ran his fingers through his hair. He was too tired to think about anything. It seemed a million years since he'd watched the sunrise at the train station. For the first time in months, he fell asleep without the taste of whiskey in his mouth or the memory of the war on his mind.

The fire was low when he heard the door open. He didn't move while Holly took off her coat, gun belt, and boots. She'd been gone for hours, but she looked as fiery and beautiful as before.

Keeping one eye open slightly, he watched her tiptoe across the room to a huge wardrobe. She glanced his direction, then, satisfied he was asleep, unbuckled her belt.

Zach felt guilty for spying on her, but he couldn't bring himself to move and announce that he was awake. The gentleman in him told him to keep his eyes closed; the man in him wouldn't allow it. He knew there was nowhere else to get undressed that was as warm as this room.

The wool trousers slipped from her hips to the floor with a soft plop. Her oversized shirt hung almost to her knees, hiding all but a quick glimpse of her legs. She pulled her arms into the shirt, and he thought she was going to pull the huge garment over her head; but instead, she began unwrapping a long strip of white cotton from around her chest.

Zach had heard his mother talk of women binding their breasts when they wanted to stop nursing babies, but he'd never known a woman to do so otherwise.

When she finished, Holly tossed the binding in a drawer and put her arms back into the shirt. Tiptoeing over to where Zach sat, Holly gently covered him with a blanket. "Good night, Yankee," she whispered.

For a long moment she stared at him, and then, convinced he was sound asleep, she leaned forward and lightly brushed her lips against his. "Thank you for my first dance and my first kiss."

Her lips were the featherlight of a wish across his mouth, but they sparked his mind with longing.

She was on the second rung of the ladder to the loft when he stopped her. "Wait!" Zach closed his fingers over her hands, resting on either side of the ladder.

Holly almost lost her footing. "You're awake!"

He could feel her hands trembling beneath his, but her eyes were

afire with challenge. The wind had blown her hair wild and free, while the night's chill had stroked a blush into her cheeks. Her beauty could never be captured in a painting, he thought, for the artist would have to hold the fire in a sunset and the wonder of a forest in winter to do her justice.

"I didn't mean to startle you." Zach could barely make words form, his heart seemed to be pounding in his throat. "I had to stop you before you were gone for the night." He couldn't let her just walk away after the way she'd touched him. "Why did you kiss me just now?"

Holly's cheeks burned, but her chin didn't lower a fraction. "If you're looking for an apology, you'll wait 'til the prairie floods."

"I'm not wanting an apology; I'm wanting an answer. Why did you kiss me just now?"

"Why did you act like you were asleep?"

Zach leaned an inch into the ladder, pinning her between him and the wooden rungs. "I've heard folks in Texas are hospitable, but I don't believe that includes a good-night kiss to every stranger spending the night."

Holly twisted to face him. "And I've heard folks around these parts call a kiss a 'Yankee dime.'"

Zach couldn't help but laugh. "Tell me why you kissed me, Holly."

She looked as if she longed to swear, but she answered, "I just wanted to know what it felt like to kiss a man. You'll be gone tomorrow, and then if anyone ever asks me if I've been kissed, I can say yes without lying."

"So you thought you'd practice on me until a man you think is right for you comes along?" He couldn't hide his smile. He could tell by her face that he'd guessed the truth.

"Maybe," she answered.

"Don't you think you should get your money's worth on that 'Yankee dime?'" He leaned closer and lightly brushed her lips.

Until she'd kissed him, he hadn't thought there'd be a chance of him ever being this close to her. But the touch of her lips had changed his mind.

"Kissing is like dancing," he whispered against her cheek. "All it takes is a little practice."

"And you'll teach me?" She moved her head so that his lips brushed across her cheek. "Then you'll be gone tomorrow, and no one will know of the lessons?"

"If that's the way you want it, pretty lady," he answered, having trouble putting words together when all he could think of was touching her lips again.

Very slowly he leaned against her, pressing Holly back against the

rungs of the ladder. His mouth opened slightly as he tasted her full bottom lip.

“Put your arms around me,” he ordered gently.

“Like this?” she asked with her hands on his shoulders. He could feel her tremble, but knew it was more from adventure than passion.

“No.” Dear Lord, she was driving him insane with her innocence. “Tighter.”

She followed his instructions, pulling him into contact with her body. His arms slid around her and lifted her off the ladder. He knew her feet weren’t touching the floor, but he couldn’t release his hold. The feel of her against him was a heaven he’d never even known to dream of.

Suddenly, he could play the game no longer. Kissing her was not a sport or a lesson, but a need so great he’d have died for the pleasure. He lowered his lips and claimed her mouth with a force that surprised them both.

A kiss meant to be chaste and light, turned warm and demanding. To his surprise, she responded in kind, learning from each move he made. There was a wonder about her that rocked his world at its foundation. This strong, self-sufficient female was all woman beneath her wrappings and more passion than most men could handle.

Finally, he broke the kiss and moved to her ear. “I don’t think you need much practice. You seem to be a natural at this, lady.”

“Again,” she demanded, loving the way he made her feel. For the first time in her life, she was glad she was a woman. She loved the hard wall of his chest against her heart and the warm feel of his arms around her waist.

Zach couldn’t keep his hands from shaking as he lowered her to the floor and cupped her face. “I’m afraid if I kiss you again, it will be more, and I don’t relish being tied to the hitching post come morning.”

Holly looked confused. “I thought you enjoyed the kiss?”

“I did. Don’t press your luck on me being a gentleman if I taste those lips again and feel your soft breasts pressed against me with just enough pressure to drive a man mad.”

Holly looked down at her breasts. “They’ve never been anything but in the way.”

Zach suddenly understood why she bound them so tightly. “Oh, no.” The firelight shadowed her shirt just enough to show the perfection of what she complained about. “How could you even think such a thing?”

“I’ll think whatever I like!” she snapped, then couldn’t hide a smile. “And I think I’d like to be kissed again.”

“One more lesson?” he asked. “And I pray one of us will have

enough sense to stop.”

Closing her eyes, Holly waited for the next kiss. She'd never dreamed she'd like such a small touch so much. Most of the men she saw had brown teeth from chewing tobacco, and the thought of touching mouths with them had never been appealing. But this man was different. He was spotlessly clean and gentle when he held her. He'd also be gone tomorrow, and no one would ever know she'd learned a few lessons in life from him.

But his lips didn't touch hers. Instead, his arm encircled her and slid below her hips. In one sweep he lifted her in his embrace. Startled, she opened her eyes and started to complain, then saw the laughter in his gaze and knew this was part of the lesson.

He carried her to the chair by the fireplace and lowered himself with her atop him. “This isn't proper, but I can't leave without teaching you one more thing. Are you afraid?”

Holly could never remember being asked such a foolish question. She'd never been afraid of anything in her life. She was the best shot in the county and could outwrestle most men, including this Yankee. What could she possibly have to be afraid of? “Get on with the lesson.”

This time he didn't lower his mouth to hers, but started at her neck and moved slowly upward. His soft lips felt wonderful as they moved over her skin, and she curled into his embrace. His fingers tenderly shoved her hair back allowing him to taste more of the flesh along her neck. She loved the way his hand twisted into her hair, applying just enough pull to move her head to his liking.

Carefully, he unbuttoned the first button of her shirt and slid the cotton from her shoulder so that he could taste more of her. She arched with pleasure, making the shirt slide dangerously low.

As though he could endure no more heaven, he leaned back and watched her curl contentedly in his lap. His hand touched her hair and drifted lightly down her cheek.

No one had ever stared at her with such eyes. In his gaze, she saw herself as a woman and for once she felt beautiful.

Leaning upward she opened her mouth slightly, silently asking for another kiss.

His lips played with her mouth for a few minutes driving her mad with wanting. While his kiss danced lightly against her, his hand moved to her waist. He knotted the shirt in his fist, pulling the material tightly over her chest. Slowly, as the kiss deepened, his fingers slid over the cotton of her shirt and lightly brushed her breasts. When she jerked as a bolt of pure pleasure shot through her body, his kiss turned loving and his hand lowered over the soft mound with passion's firmness.

His open mouth swallowed her surprise as the kiss deepened to match his touch. He knew he was holding someone whose loving was as wild and untamed as the land she came from.

Holly felt as if she were falling into deep water, far over her head. She'd always been in control. She'd always been the one to make all the decisions in her world. She'd always been the one to act, not react. And now this stranger with his polite manners and loving lessons was changing all that. And she wasn't sure she liked it.

Pushing away from Zach, Holly climbed from the chair and his embrace. For a moment he looked as if he might pull her back, but he hesitated. Fire danced in his blue-gray eyes. His long fingers opened and closed into fists, as though he were trying to capture a dream. His longing to hold her was raw and warm in his gaze. A longing so deep, it must have taken more than one lifetime to cavern.

Turning away, she stared at the fire, for she couldn't stand seeing someone as lonely as herself. She'd thought she was the only one in the world who ached for another so dearly. But she couldn't turn to this man. Not this man who'd been willing to marry just anyone. She wanted a man who would have no other woman but her.

Zach stood and paced the room. "If you're waiting for me to say I'm sorry, you'll wait 'til hell freezes over."

"I don't want your apology. Neither of us seems very good at that sort of thing anyway. I asked you for the lesson." She could still feel her body tingling from his hand touching her. How could she tell him she loved his touch but was afraid of losing control?

He grabbed his coat. "I thought you wanted me to hold you."

She could hear the hurt in his voice. He hadn't tried to trick her. He'd been honest with her from the first, but she'd never hated a man more. He must know the power he had over her with his touch. A power she'd never allowed any other to capture.

"I want you gone tomorrow!" she said, and was answered by the slamming of the door.

Without trying to stop the tears traveling down her cheeks, Holly climbed the ladder to her bed. He had to be gone come morning, because if she ever stopped hating this man long enough, she might fall in love with him, and she'd never allow that.

She'd never love a man who'd marry any woman. She had to love a man who wanted to marry only her.

Zach walked out to the corral and back until his blood cooled to normal. He'd never met such a woman. He never knew a female like Holly existed. His mother had been soft and quiet and kind. He couldn't remember once in his childhood when she'd yelled at him. His former fiancé was cut from the same bolt. She hadn't even had the strength to wait for him to return from war, but married someone else who could take care of her. Other women he'd danced a few reels of love's melody with were so gentle, he'd been afraid of upsetting them if he allowed passion to surface.

He'd heard about the Southern belles who could do nothing for themselves but weep for their men. Now he wondered how the South could have lost if the men were half as strong as the women. When he'd looked at Holly standing in front of the fire dressed only in her huge shirt, he'd thought he'd finally met a woman who could meet a man's passion with equal measure of her own.

But she'd shoved him away as though she'd only been using him to test her limits. The thought that she planned to use what he taught her to catch another angered him. Maybe he should be madder at himself than Holly for caring what happened to her. Any man foolish enough to marry such a bossy, demanding woman would surely be dancing with the devil's daughter, as Sam had suggested.

When Zach stepped back into the house, Holly lay curled on a bench by the fire. For a moment all he could do was stare at her, for he'd thought she'd have locked herself away in the loft by now.

She raised to one elbow, her hair tumbling around her in a fiery golden mass. "It's gotten too cold to sleep in the loft," she said matter-of-factly. "I've divided the room. You'll not be counting your fingers and toes come morning if you stay on your side." She patted the gun belt lapped over the corner of the bench.

Zach looked at a rope strung across the room and tied to a chair at each corner. He took off his coat, trying to control his anger. His control had kept him alive more than once, but he couldn't take any more of being pinned in, not even if the jailer were as beautiful as Holly.

"No!" he said suddenly, as he walked to the rope and jerked it so violently both chairs tumbled. "Never again!"

Holly was too surprised to react. She hadn't thought the man capable of such an outburst. He marched to the fireplace and planted his hands on either side of the hearth as he breathed deeply, pulling raw nerves under control.

After a long pause, he said more to himself than her, "When I was in the prisoner-of-war camp at Andersonville, the guards put up a line ten feet from the wall. It was a stick pole a child could jump. Everyone called it the kill line. If a prisoner crossed it, he was shot before he could reach the wall. Every morning I would walk around the camp and count the bodies hanging over the kill line. After a while, I realized they were more suicides than attempts to escape. Being a fighting soldier was far easier than wasting away in the camp."

Holly didn't know what to say. She'd heard the prisoners were treated badly on both sides. Somehow when she thought of the men going to war, she never thought of prisoners, only the soldiers and the dead.

Zach turned to face her. "You're safe where you are without a gun. I've never touched a woman who didn't welcome me, and no line need be between us."

He walked over and collapsed on the bed. All the fight gone from him.

Holly watched him lying there. He was a strange man, this Yankee. He didn't seem to care about the future, but he'd been willing to risk death rather than sleep with a rope between them. She'd only known him a few hours, yet she felt like she knew him better than she'd ever known anyone. Closing her eyes, Holly tried to forget about all that had happened tonight and think of only tomorrow and the Christmas Eve party. Tomorrow he'd be gone, and her life would return to normal.

She thought she'd just closed her eyes, when she smelled coffee. Sunshine danced in through the windows. Peering around the bench, Holly saw Zach in the kitchen.

He seemed to sense she was watching him, for he turned and smiled. "Get dressed, sleepyhead. I'm cooking you breakfast before we leave."

Holly stood and walked to the kitchen, unaware of how becoming she looked in her wrinkled shirt and wool socks. "I can cook breakfast," she offered as she stretched away her sleepiness.

Zach forced himself to concentrate on the stove. "No thanks. I had your eggs yesterday. Today, you try mine. Besides, tomorrow is both Christmas and your birthday. Consider it my farewell gift to you."

He forked her a mouthful of the most delicious eggs she'd ever tasted.

"Now get dressed," he ordered.

Holly moved to the wardrobe. "I never thought you'd be able to cook."

"I can't, really," he answered, carrying the food from the kitchen to the table. "Breakfast is about the beginning and end of my menu."

Holly reached for the cotton binding she wrapped around herself every morning.

"Don't bind yourself," he whispered from behind her.

"But everyone will know I'm a woman."

"Everyone knows it already, except the blind." He didn't move, but he felt himself reaching out for her. "This is the last day we'll be together. Allow yourself to be a woman today."

"All right." She answered reluctantly, then picked up a change of clothes and went into the kitchen to dress.

"They have lacy things ladies wear that I think would be more comfortable than the binding." Zach was way out of his realm of expertise, but it seemed no one had told Holly about women's things. "I suppose you can buy them at any ladies' dress shop."

She had just finished tying her belt, when the door flew open with a bang. Sam and Luther stormed in as if prepared to see blood on the walls and a Yankee dead on the floor.

"Mornin', Captain." Sam looked at Zach, trying to see any bruises or stab wounds.

"Morning," Zach answered raising his mug. "While you men pour yourselves a cup of coffee, I've something to say to you. First, I think as a common courtesy, you should knock before you enter a lady's home."

"Knock?" Sam mumbled.

"Lady?" Luther echoed.

"And second, I don't want either of you getting any ideas about finding Holly a husband. She's got a mind of her own, and I'm sure she can rope her own man when the time is right for her."

The two old men looked at one another. They didn't know whether to challenge this bossy stranger to a fight, or congratulate him for having survived the night in the same house as Holly.

Yesterday he'd been kind of quiet. When he passed out at the train station, they thought him the sickly type. But now, it was starting to sound like the Yankee was as demanding as Holly. A few good meals and a day without liquor had made major changes in Captain Hamilton.

Sam winked at Luther. Damned if he wouldn't give his uppers to know what went on in this house last night. It couldn't have been fighting. There was no blood. And it couldn't have been romance, 'cause the stranger was talking like he was leaving.

Holly sat down and filled her plate. "Sam, tell one of the men to

saddle Cinnamon and another good mount. I'll ride with Zach into town, then bring the mount back."

"But there ain't no train."

"I know." Holly didn't look up from her plate. "But he can stay in one of the rooms above the saloon."

"But it's a long ride," Sam added.

"I can make it in half the time you men did in the wagon. I'll be back by mid-afternoon. Have the men clear out the house and set up extra tables in the kitchen for the food."

"But one of the men can go with Captain Hamilton," Sam rationalized.

"No." Holly glanced at Zach. "I've some shopping to do for a few things the cook can't pick up for me."

Sam was out of "buts." He wanted to beg Holly to keep her Christmas present just one more day before she sent Zach back; but, as usual, she had made up her mind, and there was nothing short of a buffalo stampede that would change it.

Within an hour, Sam watched them disappear toward town. He'd warned Holly to take the main road, but he knew she'd take the shortcut like always. He set about hammering out tin holders for the Christmas tree candles with all the energy he could muster. It would be a sad Christmas with no present for Holly, but maybe he could make the party something to remember. Several of their neighbors said they were bringing sons and loved ones home from the war. For the first time in five years, there'd be a Christmas without war on everyone's mind.

Laughter boiled from Sam in sudden gulps. "Who knows?" he whispered to himself. "Maybe this year Holly will dance."

Zach leaned against the peeling wallpaper of his room above the saloon and watched the street below. For five years in the army, he'd thought of someday going home for Christmas. But now there was no home to go to, and he'd be spending Christmas Eve alone in his room. He tried to block out the sound of the drunks below in the bar, acting as if they were happy.

Several Union officers strolled the boardwalk across the street. The bartender had told him that a company of soldiers was camped outside town. The day after Christmas, they'd be heading northwest toward the frontier line to fight Indians. Zach almost wished he were going with them. The army was a lonely life, but it was all he'd known for so long, the familiar would somehow be comforting. His leave would be up soon, and he'd have to decide whether to reenlist or retire.

A knock pounded on his door.

"Come in," he answered, knowing the bottle he'd ordered was finally being delivered.

Maybe he could drink the memory of Holly from his mind. They'd ridden into town without talking of anything important. When he'd offered to buy her lunch, she'd refused, saying the clouds looked like bad weather might be moving in and she'd best get back home. Maybe it was the weather, or maybe she didn't want to stand on a street visiting with a man in Union blue. He realized by the stares that if he stayed in the South another day, he'd be wise to buy himself a change of clothes.

Zach raked his fingers through his dark hair and moved toward the door as the knock sounded again. He wished he'd had the chance to kiss her good-bye. It had been tempting to pull her to him in the middle of the street and kiss her one last time just to prove to himself that she tasted as good as he remembered. But she hadn't wanted him. She'd made it crystal clear. Besides, she'd probably have shot him for embarrassing her in public with that old Patterson Colt she kept tied to her leg.

As Zach pulled the door open with swear words ready for the slow bartender, Holly fell into his arms.

"Zach!" She tried to catch her breath. "You have to help me."

He lifted her and carried her into the room. Her hair was wild with no hat in sight. Mud was smeared across her white shirt and cheeks. Her coat was ripped at the sleeve. For a moment he thought she must have been attacked, but her gun was still strapped and holstered at her side.

“What is it, Holly?” Worry lined his face. Only moments before, all he’d thought of was how lonely he’d be on Christmas day. Now all he cared about was that she was unharmed. Holly might be headstrong and stubborn like Sam said she was, but there was a vulnerability about her that touched his heart. She’d given him a great gift without knowing it. The few hours he’d spent with her made him realize that he was still alive.

Huge tears bubbled in her evergreen eyes. “I took the back trail out of town. I thought it’d be faster.”

Zach held her trembling shoulders tightly. “What happened?”

“It’s Cinnamon. We fell.” A single tear tumbled down her cheek.

Zach moved his hands slowly along her body. “Are you hurt?”

“No!” Holly pushed his hands away and stood. “You have to help Cinnamon. I remember you saying you were a vet, so I came here first. I rode the other horse and left Cinnamon.”

Zach grabbed his hat and saddlebags, and was a step behind her as they ran down the stairs into the bar. Everyone in the room stopped to watch, but there was no time to explain.

When they reached the street, Zach tossed Holly onto the horse he’d ridden into town only an hour before, and climbed behind her. There was no need for words. Zach knew if he didn’t get to the injured horse, the roan would be Christmas dinner for the wolves.

He held Holly tightly against him as they rode. She molded so easily into his arms, as though a dream finally found a place in reality. Wrapping his hands tightly around her, he whispered, “It’s going to be all right,” and wished he believed his own words.

She turned her head slightly, rubbing against his chin. Holly wasn’t the kind of woman to admit being frightened or feeling helpless, but her action told him she needed him if only for now. He kissed the side of her forehead lightly, closing his eyes as he tried to memorize the smell of her hair.

They climbed the bluff at full gallop where Cinnamon had fallen, but Zach didn’t try to pull in the reins. Concern outweighed their safety.

Holly’s horse stood at the bottom of the uneven ground. Though still saddled, the animal raised her head in wild challenge. Pain had erased years of gentling from the beautiful roan’s gaze.

Zach jumped from the saddle and walked slowly toward the horse. He hadn’t practiced his profession since the war started, but he knew

animals. And this one was as wild with fright as her owner.

"Easy, now." Zach moved closer. "I'm going to make it better." He brushed the horse's mane and felt blood oozing from a small cut on her neck. His hands continued moving along the mare while he kept talking, trying to calm her. Her front right leg was cut with an ugly gash, but no bones seemed to be broken.

He glanced at the strong woman everyone thought could spit fire. She was curled atop a rock, looking like a child afraid to watch.

"I tried, but she won't put any weight on her leg," Holly whispered. "Will we have to shoot her?"

Zach pulled a shirt from his saddlebag and wrapped it around Cinnamon's leg. "How far are we from the ranch?"

"An hour's ride," Holly answered.

"How long if we walk?"

"Two, maybe three hours."

"Then we walk it." Zach pulled Holly to her feet. "If we can get there before she loses too much blood and before infection sets in, she might have a chance."

Cinnamon protested as he pulled her forward. "But you'll have to talk to her, Holly. She's your horse. She'll do things for you that she won't for me. She'll walk despite the pain."

Holly nodded and fell in step next to Cinnamon. She talked to the mare while Zach watched the bandage he'd made turn red and the sky darken.

They hadn't moved far before it started to snow. Light, huge flakes. A Christmas snow, his mother would have called it.

When Holly looked at him as if it were hopeless, Zach fought the urge to kiss her. "A little snow will make the ground softer." He couldn't help but smile. Here, walking in the snow with a lame horse and a beautiful woman, was a hundred times better than anywhere else he'd ever been on Christmas Eve.

He wanted to put Holly on the other mount and tell her to ride home where it was warm, but he wasn't sure Cinnamon would follow him. They moved slowly across the open plains, step by step.

It was almost dark when they saw the light of the ranch. The snow had stopped, leaving the air clear and newborn. Lanterns sparkled against the blanket of white. Folks were already arriving for the party, for Zach could hear voices and music.

Only Sam ran out to greet them when they drew near. "I was worried half crazy about you," he scolded Holly. "If you hadn't been acting like you'd already eaten locoweed before you left, I would have saddled up and come looking for you."

The old man glanced at Zach without surprise. "Welcome back, Captain."

Zach touched the brim of his hat. "Evening," he said, as if it were nothing unusual for him to drop by. "Cinnamon's been hurt. I'm going to need boiling water, lots of wraps, a sewing needle, and a few bottles of whiskey."

Sam looked down at the horse's bloody leg. "There ain't nothing to be done," he forced out the words slowly. "I've seen horses cut up like that before. We'll have to shoot her. I'm real sorry, Holly."

"No!" Holly pulled the mare into the barn.

"But, Holly." Sam rubbed his wrinkled face with an equally wrinkled hand. "You don't want her to be in more pain. It ain't fair to the horse to let her suffer."

Zach didn't answer as he helped Holly pull the animal into a stall. Zach had been through more suffering than he thought he could have endured, yet he wouldn't give up one day of it, if it meant he had to give up the rest of his life. He figured Cinnamon might feel the same. Holly had taught him there was something worth living for.

"No!" Holly answered Sam. "We're going to let Zach try."

Sam shook his head and turned to Zach for orders. There was no arguing with her, so he might as well save his breath. "Do what you can, Captain, and I'll help."

"I'll want a cot set up beside the stall and as many lanterns as you can find lining the top. We'll blindfold the horse, so the light won't bother her eyes. Find some oats and mix them thick with whiskey. We've got to give her enough to take the edge off the pain, but not so much that she lies down on us."

Sam ran to issue Zach's orders. Holly brushed the mane of her horse, then slowly turned to Zach. "What can I do?"

"You can see to your guests. I'll call you if there is any change. I've got to get her calmed down and trusting me now, or she'll never let me do what I need to do."

Holly locked her arms around Zach's neck. "Thank you for helping. No matter what happens, I'm glad you're here."

"You're welcome." Zach wanted to pull her close and make her believe everything would be fine, but several men loaded down with supplies entered the barn. "Enjoy the party. You've done a great deal by getting her back here. We'll know little before morning."

"Promise you'll come get me if there's any change?" Holly shoved the tears from her cheeks.

"I promise." Zach brushed a strand of her hair off her face. He'd give all he owned if she cared half as much about him as she did the horse.

Suddenly she was gone, and Zach was surrounded by cowhands, each offering advice. Finally, Sam silenced them by telling them that Zach had gone all the way through Boston's vet school, so they might

quit their “jawing” and learn a few things.

As he worked, his thoughts kept drifting back to how beautiful Holly had looked the night before. He wasn't sure he could spend another night on this ranch without touching her again. That's why he'd had the cot delivered to the barn. He had to put as much distance between them as he could or risk making a fool of himself.

Her mind was on him also as she went through the ritual of welcoming the other ranchers. She'd much rather have been in the barn helping, but this one night a year, she was expected to host the Christmas Eve party.

The snow didn't seem to discourage a single guest, and by nine o'clock the room was filled with her neighbors. Several of the families had brought their children and planned on bedding them down in the bunkhouse, until all the grown-ups had had their fill of talking and dancing.

To Holly's surprise, many of her friends brought with them young men for her to meet. They were welcomed as war heroes in a war where neither side had won. Most of the men were still wearing all, or parts, of their uniforms. Throwing away good clothing was not something a farmer or rancher did even if the war was over.

Two of the five Travis boys came home, and from what Holly could tell, they were as crude as they had been before they left. She never forgot how they'd teased her as a child, and how cruel they'd been because she didn't act like the other girls. Now both men had a woman on each arm, as though they were the most valued choice for a husband in the county.

Other single women were in new dresses to match the holiday season, but Holly's only change had been to wear one of the camisoles she'd bought at the dress shop in town. She could hardly show that to anyone, so she looked the same as she did the other three hundred and sixty-four days of the year. But the silk next to her skin made her smile to herself and feel pretty.

As before, no one asked Holly to dance. They probably heard she didn't do such things. As the night aged, the men drank more and the Travis boys began to tell stories of the war. The women formed small groups to chat. Once more Holly found herself apart, so she occupied her time with refilling cups and adding logs to the fire.

When Zach opened the door just after midnight, she jumped with concern for Cinnamon. His gaze scanned the room before coming to rest on her. She couldn't help reacting to his smile with one of her own.

He seemed unsure as he removed his hat and took only one step into the room. Everyone stopped talking at once and stared at the uniform he wore. Hatred chilled the air. Both Travis boys stood as

though preparing for one last battle.

"I'm sorry to disturb the party," Zach said politely. "But I'm the vet Miss McCarter asked to treat her horse. I'd like to have a few words with her." He was thankful Sam and Luther hadn't told anyone of Holly's surprise Christmas present; maybe Holly's neighbors would believe his lie.

"Do your talking outside," Bret, the elder Travis, ordered. "We want none of the likes of you in here."

Several others mumbled oaths beneath their breaths.

Zach tipped his hat as if the bitter order had been only a suggestion, and stepped backward.

"Wait!" Holly hurried to the doorway. "Tell me about Cinnamon before you go."

Zach's gaze studied the room, looking for simmering trouble to boil over. "The bleeding has stopped." His words were low, yet all the room seemed to be listening. "And it looks like my stitches will hold. By morning we'll know if there's infection."

Holly's hand lightly brushed his arm. "Thank you," she whispered. "Can't you stay a moment and have some punch or a dance?"

Everyone in the room stood silently waiting for him to leave. He knew he was playing with fire staying any longer, but he couldn't turn down her request. "I'd be delighted to dance with you, Miss McCarter."

As he slowly removed his hat and coat, the musicians began to play a waltz. When he turned back to Holly, she was smiling even though everyone else in the room seemed to be frowning.

He lifted her gently into his embrace and danced across the floor. It didn't matter that everyone in the room was watching with either surprise or hatred for the Yankee. All that mattered was that she was in his arms once more. His need to hold her overruled his sense of danger.

Slowly, other couples took to the floor, as though unwilling to allow Zach and Holly center stage. When the room crowded with dancers, Zach knew it was time to get back to his work at the barn. If he didn't hold himself in very close check, he would hold her a little too tightly, and in this crowd that could only mean trouble.

Holly followed him to the porch. "Thank you for helping me in there." She wished she could explain how very alone she'd been feeling until he came. Maybe he understood.

Zach kissed the top of her head. "You're welcome."

She tried to hide the shakiness in her voice. "As soon as I can slip away, I'll be out to the barn to check on Cinnamon."

"I'll be waiting," he answered with a promise in his eyes that had nothing to do with the horse.

She'd hold him once more before he left, but not now when someone might step on the porch at any moment. "Later," she whispered, answering his promise with one of her own.

She watched Zach turn and walk toward the barn. He walked tall and proud, yet it was his gentleness that drew her to him. He hadn't even resented her neighbors for their rudeness, but understood them. For the most part they were good folks, but years of hating take a while to die.

Just before she turned to go back into the house, she saw several men run from the corner of her place to the back of the bunkhouse. A moment later, they crossed in the shadows between the bunkhouse and the barn. Holly felt icy fear coat her heart. Trouble, traveling in a pack, was headed straight for Zach.

Holly slipped back into the room and noticed several people watching her closely. She'd only been on the porch with Zach a few moments, but they looked at her as though she'd just committed a crime.

"So you're too good to dance with your neighbors." Bret Travis stepped in front of her. He hadn't more than glanced at her all evening, and now he was talking like they were engaged. Another glance around the room told Holly that Bret's brother, along with several other young men, were missing.

"None of my neighbors have asked me to dance," Holly pointed out. She needed to grab her gun and see if Zach was in trouble, but she had to get past this pile of rudeness first.

"Well, I'm asking!" Bret shouted loud enough for everyone in the room to hear.

Without waiting for an answer, he swept her into his arms and started stomping across the floor. His steps were uneven and unpolished, and his hold was too tight. Holly tried to pull away, but he held to her without noticing her discomfort. Dancing with him was nothing like dancing with Zach.

Finally the music ended, and he released her hand. "So you do dance, Holly McCarter. Most of the men were starting to wonder if you did anything but ranch." His arm still held her to him. "Shall we see if that Yankee taught you to kiss as well?"

He pulled her beneath the mistletoe and leaned over her. Before Holly could protest, his lips were on hers. The kiss was wet and sloppy with the taste of whiskey on his mouth. She heard several shouts for Bret to let her go, but no one came to her rescue as he continued to grind his mouth against hers, bruising her lips with the force of his kiss.

Holly reacted as violently as a volcano. She jammed her knee up between his legs as her fist slammed into his ribs. When he didn't let her go at once, her nails clawed into his face, taking layers of skin while her teeth bit down hard on his bottom lip.

Bret Travis jerked away from her, grabbing his bleeding face with one hand while he raised his other hand to slap her.

Before he could lower the blow, the sound of a rifle being cocked stopped all action. "I wouldn't do that if I were you, Bret." Sam's voice

was calm, almost friendly. "If Holly doesn't want to kiss you, I'd suggest you find someone willing. 'Cause if you ever touch her again, I'll shoot you myself after she finishes murdering you."

"Don't worry," Bret tried to gain back a little of his composure. "I wouldn't touch her again if she was the last woman west of the Mississippi. It'll take more than this ranch to talk a man into marrying her."

Sam didn't lower the rifle from Bret's gut. "I think we best be calling it a night, boys."

He glanced around to get Holly's approval, but she was gone. She'd vanished along with her gun belt that had been hanging on the peg by the back door. Sam didn't comment on her absence as he helped everyone gather up their things, but he had a feeling she was heading straight toward the barn.

Holly didn't care about the party. It was the farthest thing from her mind as she ran across the yard. She slipped in the side door of the barn and pulled her gun from its holster.

Five men were in the center of the barn. Two were holding Zach between them while a third jabbed one punch after another into his ribs. Judging from the cuts and bruises on all three attackers' faces, Zach had not been captured without a fight. The other two men were watching the main door, listening for the sound of anyone coming.

One of the watchers tossed the other a rope. "Tie him to the stall when he can't stand any longer," he ordered. "Let's show this Yankee what we do to the likes of him."

While two men roped Zach's body to the top board of the stall, the third man stretched a whip across the hay with a *pop*. Zach didn't move as the whip snapped above his back, marking its target.

Holly moved closer as she heard the first slap of leather against flesh. The sound sickened her all the way to the core, for she knew the whip had just sliced across Zach's back. Another *pop* sounded as she stepped into the light and fired her gun.

The man with the whip grabbed his hand and yelled in pain while all the others turned to Holly.

"That's enough!" she ordered as she widened her stance. "Your fun's over."

"Now, Holly . . ."

Another shot struck the dirt an inch in front of the man who'd spoken.

"The war's over, boys, and I aim to put an end to the fighting right now." She fired again.

The leader of the group ventured forward, his hands in the air. "But, you don't know how those Yankees treated us during the war. Then he had the nerve to walk right in and dance with one of our

women.”

Holly glanced at Zach. “I know this Yankee’s got enough scars already, and I’d stake my life he never fought except in a fair fight.” Not a man in the barn looked like he wanted to argue with a lady holding a gun. “As for dancing with me, he did so at my request.”

Several other men reached the barn door as she continued, “If you can’t leave the war behind, don’t set foot on my property again.”

Luther cradled his rifle in his arms. “You heard the lady!” he yelled as Sam joined him. Both men looked younger than they had in years.

The others moved to saddle their horses as Luther and Sam joined Holly. They stood like two aging pillars on either side of her as the attackers left the barn.

When the place was emptied, Holly rushed to Zach. His shirt was sliced open and a long thin line of blood dripped from his back. She lifted his head, but through the cuts and bruises his eyes remained closed.

“We’ve got a bunk set up near Cinnamon’s stall.” Luther untied one of Zach’s arms. “I’ll see to him.”

“No.” Holly brushed the hair from his face. “Bring him to the house. Sam, get a few men to run ahead and move the bed close to the fire.”

“He’s been roughed up pretty bad, honey,” Sam said the obvious.

“I know.” Holly tried to hide her tears. “But he’s my Christmas present, and I’m taking care of him.”

Luther looked at Sam and shrugged. When the Yankee was in good shape, she’d sent him back. Now that he looked like death warmed over in a dirty pot, she wanted to keep him. There was no figuring Holly.

Holly tenderly spread the salve over the open cuts the whip had made on Zach's back. She could feel other scars and knew this was not the first time he'd felt the sting of a whip. This man, so proper and proud in his uniform, was so scarred beneath. She'd found what looked like a gunshot wound in both his leg and the left side of his chest. Besides the marks on his back, she discovered several that could only have been made with a blade. She wondered how Zachary Hamilton was still alive. It was no surprise that all he wanted in life was to watch the sun rise without people between himself and the horizon. He'd probably seen enough of people to last a lifetime.

She gently bandaged his wounds, then with Sam's help, lay him on his side and covered him with layers of quilts. Zach's face looked worse than she'd thought possible. One of his eyes was completely closed from swelling, while cuts and bruises seemed to fight for space on the rest of his skin.

"He don't look so good." Sam pulled at his belt as Holly put a pillow beneath Zach's head.

"I've seen rabbits caught in a twister who looked better than he does," Luther added.

"He'll be fine in a few days," Holly corrected as she brushed strands of coal black hair from his forehead. "Now get out of here and let him rest. He'll be better come morning."

"If he ain't, we might as well bury him," Sam added as he moved toward the door. "I'll keep an eye on your horse. You keep an eye on your Yankee."

"He isn't my Yankee," Holly answered.

Sam and Luther glanced at one another, but neither of them would call her a liar even though they both knew their Holly was not being honest with them, or herself. He was her Yankee, whether she knew it or not.

She closed the door and returned to Zach's side. His bruises didn't matter. Somehow, a man had never been more handsome to her. He'd taken care of Cinnamon. He'd danced with her when everyone in the room stared at him with hate. From the minute they'd met, he'd treated her like a lady. Something no other man in the state had done. Even the little things he did, like standing when she walked into a

room, were treasures she would tuck away in her heart.

Holly leaned over and very gently brushed the corner of his mouth with her own. After Zach's kisses, she should have never allowed someone like Bret Travis to kiss her.

"Trying to steal another 'Yankee dime,' pretty lady?" Zach mumbled.

Holly straightened in surprise. "How long have you been awake?"

"Long enough to feel your fingers brushing across my back," Zach answered without opening his eyes. "Long enough to taste the sweetness of your lips against mine."

"I was only treating your wound." Holly tried to be calm, but she could feel her heart pounding as if she'd been running.

"And when you touched me other places?" Zach questioned, remembering the soft brush of her fingers over his body.

"I was just making sure there were no broken bones."

Zach smiled knowing the truth. Her touch had been light, exploring, caressing. "And the kiss?" he asked.

Holly faced him directly. "Why didn't you tell me all kisses weren't wonderful?"

"I hoped you wouldn't find out," he answered.

"Well, I did and it was disgusting."

"What would you have me do?" Zach smiled. "Kill any man who kisses you poorly?"

"No." Holly laughed. "I can do my own killing." She leaned closer. "I'd have you kiss me again so that I don't forget what the good ones are like."

"With pleasure," he answered, and pulled her down to his mouth.

His touch was as gentle as it had been the night before, only now his lips lingered in a slow-stirring passion that swept across her as silently as spring air warms the land after winter.

She curled beside him, loving the way he cradled her against his side as though she were of great value.

Pulling back slightly, she whispered against his bruised cheek, "I don't want to hurt you. Be careful of your back."

"There is no pain in my world if you're by my side," he answered. "I thought I was all broken up inside. Nothing mattered to me anymore. I would have sold my soul for peace. But you've taught me differently." He leaned on one elbow and pulled her closer.

She felt the weight of his chest press against her side, and rolled into the warmth. His sudden intake of breath was from the pain of having pure pleasure resting beside him. His mouth covered hers as he erased Bret's kiss from her mind. All the longing was satisfied as she answered his need with her own.

When he finished the kiss, Holly stretched beside him in

contentment and anticipation of the next touch.

Zach lifted his hand and noticed the bandage she'd tied to protect his bruised and bleeding knuckles. He bit at the cotton, but couldn't pull it away without taking his other arm from around her.

He lowered his hand to her. "Take it off," he ordered.

"But your knuckles are cut."

"Take it off," he insisted.

Holly unwrapped the bandage, noting that the bleeding had stopped, but the skin was still raw along his knuckles. "It needs to be wrapped." She lifted her chin in challenge.

"I need to be able to feel without any hindrance." His voice was as insistent as her own.

When she opened her mouth to argue further, his lips claimed hers once more in a kiss. This time the kiss was hard and demanding, yet his hand gently stroked her side as his lips branded hers.

When he broke their kiss, she was breathless. Her heart was pounding, and her chest heaved up and down against his side. "Did you mean what you said about the war being over on this ranch?" he asked.

"Yes," she answered. "The hatred has to stop sometime, and it might as well stop here and now. A few of the folks may be angry, but they'll get over it by next Christmas."

His fingers spread across her just above her belt and pressed gently before he suddenly knotted the material of her shirt into his fist. "It'll be dawn in a few hours. Lie beside me 'til then. Let the war between us end."

Holly started to answer, but he stopped her with his finger on her lips.

"Before you agree, I'll tell you that if you stay by my side, I plan to love you tonight." His voice was low with passion. "I can't catch you if you run, so don't agree to stay if you're planning to bolt."

"And if I stay and fight?"

Zach laughed. "If you stay and fight, you'll probably kill me. No, pretty lady, if you stay it will be to love, not to fight."

When she rolled suddenly from the bed, pain stronger than all the blows he'd taken earlier combined shot through Zach's heart. He leaned against the pillow and closed his eyes. Why had he even hoped to dream that she'd allow him to touch her? Hadn't she said often enough in the past two days that she'd never care for him? Why couldn't he have been happy with kissing her? Zach knew the answer. Kissing her was a sweet hell, when he wanted to love her every night for the rest of his life.

"Well?" Holly's voice startled him. "Are you going to lift the covers, or do I have to stay on top freezing 'til dawn?"

Zach looked up at her. She'd removed her trousers and shirt, and was standing before him in a camisole and white lace drawers that hung past her knees. If ever there was a woman who should have been dubbed an angel on earth, it was Holly—as long as she kept her mouth closed, of course. Her beauty put the sunset he'd seen to shame.

"Well, Yankee?" she snapped. "Do you want me to snuggle next to you for a few hours or not?"

Zach lifted the covers. He couldn't have gotten a word past his heart pounding in his throat if his life had depended on it. She slid in beside him and cuddled against his side as if she'd been doing it for a lifetime.

"I'll let you touch me," she said, as if to make sure he understood who was in charge, "if you continue to kiss me at the same time. I've grown to like your kisses more than a little."

Zach moved his hand lightly over the cotton of her camisole. The lace tickled his palm when he pulled the first ribbon.

She lay very still, watching him moving to the second ribbon. When his fingers passed the valley between her breasts, he brushed her warm skin. "Before this night is over," he whispered as he pulled the ribbon and revealed more of her flesh, "you'll like my touch as dearly as you like my kisses."

"We'll see, Yankee." She smiled and stretched, loving the way her movements made him lose his breath.

His mouth lowered over her lips, and all the world but his arms disappeared.

Christmas morning dawned cold and clear as Holly slept. When the sun was high, she smiled in her sleep and rolled toward Zach's warmth. The night had been magic. He'd been right. She would never get enough of his kisses, just as she would never have her fill of his touch.

She reached again for his warmth, not wanting the night to end.

But he wasn't there. Holly sat up in bed like a shot and searched the room. Zach was nowhere in the room. The huge empty room decorated for Christmas was the saddest sight she'd ever seen.

She jumped and ran to the kitchen, expecting to see him cooking breakfast as he had the day before. But the stove was as cold as the muscles pushing around her heart.

She stomped into her clothes, trying to keep her anger down. There had to be a reason. Maybe he'd gone to check on Cinnamon? But he should have awakened her. Maybe he'd gone outside for water or wood. "Maybe, maybe," she shouted trying to ignore a small voice that whispered that maybe he'd left her.

Sam met her at the barn door. "The roan's going to make it!" he said. "She's even testing some weight on that right front foot this morning. Whatever that captain did, he did right. She may not still run like the wind, but she'll have many a foal for years to come."

Holly tried to act happy, but she doubted she fooled Sam. "Where's Zach?" she asked, looking past the old man for her Yankee.

The old man's face became a waterfall of wrinkles. "He rode out of here about three hours ago. It couldn't have been a minute past dawn."

Holly blinked hard and tried to swallow. "Did he say where he was going?"

"No," Sam tried to read her. "He knew you didn't want no part of a mail-order husband, not even as a Christmas present, so my guess is he'll be back on the train come tomorrow morning."

Holly fought the tears. "Well, he's wrong. I do want him."

"You want me and Luther to ride into town and get him back for you?" Sam asked. "We'll hog-tie him in the wagon if we have to."

"No!" Holly had never wanted to cry so dearly in all her life. "I want a husband who walks in of his own free will and asks me to

marry him.” She didn’t add that she’d never want another man but Zach for as long as she lived. She’d give him the ranch if he’d just come back. It didn’t matter to her anymore. Nothing mattered but the feel of his arms around her.

Sam scratched his balding head. “Two days ago, you couldn’t talk enough about sending him back. Now you’ve decided you want to keep him. Holly, you’re a hard one to get a Christmas present for.”

She ignored his ramblings and stormed back into the house. The garlands and colorful ribbons only made her more lonely. Christmas was a time for rejoicing, yet all she wanted to do was curl up in a corner and cry. The most wonderful man in the world had been handed to her, and she’d been foolish enough to want more. What did it matter that he was willing to marry anyone? She only wanted him.

The sound of horses traveling fast drew her attention. She walked to the porch and wondered what sort of trouble was arriving now. If it was the pack of boys she’d run off last night returning, they were too late. Their beating hadn’t run the Yankee off; her loving had.

Holly shielded her eyes as she spotted four men galloping across the land. All wore the same blue wool coats Zach had worn, and their hats were pinned as his, marking them as cavalry. She couldn’t see their faces, but she knew trouble. Without any extra movement, she lowered her hand and unstrapped the gun’s guard from her holster.

A cloud of dry snow surrounded them as they reined to a stop in front of her cabin. With a sharp command, all four climbed down from their horses.

“Miss McCarter?” A nice-looking officer removed his hat as he took the first step up the porch.

“Yes,” Holly answered.

He bowed slightly. “My name’s Henry, Henry Anderson. I’m from Maine, but my mother was a McCarter before she married.”

Holly tried to be polite, but her impatience was showing. “Nice to meet you, Mr. Anderson, but I’m sure we’re no kin. To my knowledge, neither my mother nor father have any living relatives. May I ask why you’ve ridden onto my land?”

“I came to make proper introductions.” The young officer looked nervous, but his smile was honest. “Even though we may not be kin, may I have the honor of introducing one of our most decorated officers to you.”

Holly didn’t answer, so the young man continued, “We met him in town this morning. We’re on our way to the frontier to help with the Indian problem, but he asked us to take time to introduce him properly to you.”

Zach stepped from between the horses as the man continued, “Miss Holly McCarter, I’d like you to meet Captain Zachary Hamilton.”

Zach took her hand politely in his gloved hand and bowed as he kissed her fingers. "I'm honored, Miss McCarter." His bruised eye was barely open, but he'd never looked more handsome to her.

"If I may have the pleasure, I'd like to ask for your hand in marriage? I wish to marry only you and if you turn me down, I plan to ride with these men to the frontier, for I swear on my honor I'll marry no other."

An older man stepped to Zach's side. "Well, young lady, you'd best make up your mind. We ride out tomorrow at first light. I'm authorized to marry you now, if it's what you want."

"It's what I want," Holly whispered.

Zach pulled her into his arms before she could say more.

Sam and Luther watched the wedding from the bunkhouse.

"I knew he was just what she wanted for Christmas." Luther grinned as he shifted tobacco from one side of his mouth to the other. "Course, he might be safer in Indian territory than being married to Holly."

Sam didn't laugh at Luther's joke. "What are we going to do now with her birthday, Christmas, and their anniversary on the same day? We'll have to get her one whale of a gift next year."

"Nope," Luther laughed. "I think we got her just what she wants for a lifetime. We'd best stop while we're ahead."

Sam shook his head. "The way they looked at each other, there'll probably be a baby to get somethin' for next year. And another one the next year. And so on. Look what you started, Luther."

Luther smiled as he watched Zach carry Holly into the house. "I knew he was the perfect present for her the minute I laid eyes on him. Yep. There ain't a man in a million who can make Holly happy, but I could tell by the cut of him the first time I saw him, Captain Hamilton was our man."

For the first time in fifty years, Sam was speechless as he followed Luther back into the bunkhouse. Just before Luther closed the door, Sam asked with a wink, "By the way, ain't it your birthday next month?"

Luther swallowed when he should have spit.

Read on for a preview of the next novel in Jodi's heartwarming
Harmony series

JUST DOWN THE ROAD

Available April 2012 from Berkley!

Chapter 1

Saturday night

September 2011

Harmony County Hospital

Dr. Addison Spencer stood between the emergency room doors of Harmony's only hospital and waited for the next wave of trouble to storm the entrance. The reflection of her tall, slim body dressed in white appeared more ghost than human in the smoky glass. For a blink, Addison feared she might be fading away like an old photograph facing the sun. When she'd been a child with light blond hair, her father had called her his sunshine; now there seemed little sunshine left. If it weren't for her work, she'd have no anchor to hang on to in life.

Saturday night always promised a full house in the ER, yet the howling wind just beyond the glass whispered change. She'd already been up since four A.M. delivering twins to a teen mother who yelled all the way through the birthing, but Addison's shift wouldn't be over tonight until the bars closed. If a fight didn't break out in the parking lot of the Buffalo Bar and Grill, maybe, just maybe, she could be in bed by two.

She thought of the silence at the little place she'd rented ten miles from town. An old four-room house with hand-me-down furniture from decades past. Nothing special. Nothing grand. Only the porch wrapped all the way around, and in every direction she saw peace. A single neighbor's place spotted the landscape to the south. Cornfields were to the east and rocky untamed land to the north and west. Closing her eyes, she wished she were already there.

"Dr. Spencer?" Nurse Georgia Veasey's voice echoed behind her.

"Yes?" Addison turned, trying hard not to show any hint of the exhaustion she felt. One of her med school professors had drummed into everyone he taught that a professional gives her best until she drops and can give nothing at all. He often ranted that a career in medicine left little room for life beyond the hospital walls, and for Addison that seemed perfect. One bad marriage had taught her all she wanted to know of the world outside.

"Harley phoned in from the bar." Georgia moved closer, as though

looking through the night for trouble. “Appears we got a pickup load of roughnecks coming in all bleeding and cussing.”

A year ago she wouldn’t have known what the nurse was talking about. She’d learned that roughnecks were oil field workers. “Who’d they fight?” Addison asked without any real interest. Half the time the drunks couldn’t answer that question themselves.

“One man apparently, but the caller said it was Tinch Turner. From what I hear, he never joins in a fight unless the odds are five to one.”

Addison understood. “Get six rooms ready.” She’d be stitching up the load of roughnecks and probably operating on the fool who took them all on. “I’ll go scrub up. You know what to do.”

The head nurse nodded. She’d start the staff cleaning up blood and giving shots while their drunken patients turned from fighters to babies. The nurses and aides would comfort the boys in grown men’s bodies as they sewed them up and called someone to come get them.

Addison knew Georgia would send the one who was most seriously hurt to the first room. She would be waiting there, ready to do her best one more time.

As she moved inside, Addison stopped long enough to pour a strong cup of black coffee. She hated coffee and yet seemed to live on it lately. Going into her twentieth hour on her feet, she needed something to keep her awake. Odds were good that in a few minutes she’d be going into surgery trying to save the life of some jerk who should have gone home to his wife and family after work.

Some doctors loved the emergency room and practiced there for their entire career, but Addison knew only that she wanted to be a doctor. Her father had spent years pushing her toward what he called a more promising career, meaning more money, more praise, but no matter how hard she tried, she never measured up to his standards. If she’d told him she simply wanted to practice medicine, he would have screamed his disappointment. But these past few months in Harmony had allowed her to love her career again and to think about what *she* wanted.

The latest problem between her father and her, the one that had driven her here, might be over by the time she returned home and she could finally tell him of her plans. If she was lucky, the career path he’d planned for her would no longer be an option.

Chapter 2

Tinch Turner waited in his pickup for all the oil field workers to pile out and go into the ER. They'd have a few black eyes, a few stitches, but he knew from experience that none of them was hurt bad enough to be admitted. Tinch just had to break up the fight as fast as he could, and sometimes the easiest way to get trouble's attention is to hit it between the eyes.

Next week he'd buy the boys a drink and explain to them that if they were in Harmony they needed to behave. Howard Smithers shouldn't have started calling them oil field trash, but every one of the roughnecks had been flirting with Howard's wife. She was barroom beautiful and tended to forget she was married when she drank. Tinch had seen her flirt before, and he couldn't help but wonder if she wanted Howard to be jealous or dead.

Closing his eyes, Tinch told himself he should have stayed out of it. Several others in the bar could have stepped in to help Howard. But Tinch had tossed caution out the window about the time he gave up on caring whether he lived or died. Somehow, taking a few blows reminded him that he could still feel, even if it was only pain.

Not that he wanted to feel again. He wanted to die and lie next to his wife in the cemetery. He just wasn't able to kill himself. It bothered him that he was just one breath away from her. All he needed to do was not breathe and he'd be with his Lori Anne. Only God had played a trick on them. He'd made Lori Anne fragile and Tinch strong as a bull. She couldn't make it to her thirtieth birthday and, with his bad luck, he'd probably live to be a hundred. Maybe, if he kept drinking and fighting, one night he'd get lucky and someone would put him out of his misery.

The blood dripping off his forehead bothered him enough to make him climb out of his pickup and head for the emergency room door. He didn't much care about the pain, but he hated bleeding all over everything. He'd get a doc to stitch up the cut, and then he'd go back to his farm and drink until he washed the memories away and finally slept.

Through the blood, he saw Nurse Veasey. She was frowning at him. Hell, he thought, she was always frowning at him. "Evenin', Georgia," he said, thinking she had that same look when she first saw

him sitting next to her in the third grade more than twenty years ago.

“Shut up, Tinch. I don’t even want to talk to you.” She grabbed his shirt and pulled him toward the first little examining room. “Didn’t I tell you I’d beat you up myself if you came in here after a fight again? I swear if there were two like you in this town we’d have to build another wing onto the hospital.”

Despite a headache the size of a mustang bucking in his brain, Tinch smiled. “You did threaten me last time, Georgia, and the fear of it kept me away for weeks, I swear.”

She slapped him on the arm, and he thought of suggesting that might not be protocol for nurses, but Tinch decided to wait until he could see to run before he upset her more. He’d gone to school with her and her two sisters. All three were good girls determined to make the world a better place, or at least improve Harmony. Maryland taught school, Virginia married a preacher, and Georgia became a nurse. They were women on missions. The type Tinch had spent his life avoiding.

“Sit down on the table and keep quiet,” Georgia said as she shoved his chin back and poked around the wound running half the length of his forehead. “It doesn’t look all that bad. If you had any brains, they would have dribbled out a long time ago. I’ll send in the doctor.”

“Aren’t you going to give me something for the pain?”

She shook her head. “Judging from your breath, you’ve already had enough.” She tossed him a towel. “Try not to bleed on anything.”

Tinch grinned. “Thanks, darlin’.”

“Don’t you dare *darlin’* me, Tinch Turner. You’re a walking one-man demolition derby. Stay here; I’ve got people who care about themselves so try and mend.”

She was gone before he could bother her more. Tinch shrugged. He liked “the states,” as everyone called her and her sisters, but he had a feeling they were passing around a petition to have him banned from town. Maryland had told him the last time she saw him that the way he drove was a bad influence on her high school students, and Virginia had been praying for him for so long, her knees were probably callused.

Tinch lay back on the examining table, wishing he’d brought the rest of the bottle of whiskey with him. When the door opened, he didn’t even look up. He was just about beyond caring for anything or anyone in his life.

“Mr. Turner, I’m Dr. Spencer,” someone said as she moved close to the table.

Tinch opened one eye, but he couldn’t see much through all the blood.

“Lie still and I’ll take a look at that cut.”

He didn't move as she cleaned the blood away with a warm towel. "Any chance it's fatal?" he mumbled.

The all-business voice answered, "Afraid not. You allergic to anything?"

He closed his eyes. "Work. Women. Hospitals." He felt a shot poke into his arm. "Silence. Snakes. And Wednesdays. I hate Wednesdays. And kids. Strange little things, always running around screaming in stores." He thought of more things he was allergic to, but he couldn't seem to get the words out.

For a few moments he knew the doctor was still there. He felt her pushing his hair away from his forehead like Lori Anne used to do. He could almost see Lori Anne smiling at him, saying she wanted to see his beautiful blue eyes better. She'd claimed she could measure his love for her in his eyes, and he'd never doubted she could.

Lori Anne's face faded and he dropped away into blackness.

Chapter 3

Reagan Truman watched the constant coming and going from the emergency room below her uncle's window on the third floor. Her world had become one hospital room, and even watching the drunks stumble out seemed interesting tonight. Part of her wished she were out on a date with Noah McAllen, parked somewhere along a back road where they could talk and cuddle, but tonight, this was where she belonged.

She glanced over at her uncle's bed. The room was lined with machines that moved and beeped and marked time, but for the old man resting, time seemed to have stood still. He drifted between life and death, swinging like a rusty pendulum from one to the other.

If Reagan could see death coming for him, she'd fight with every ounce of her energy to stop it from taking Jeremiah Truman. After five years of living in Harmony, she felt like she had a wide circle of friends, but when she'd arrived, a runaway with little hope of finding anywhere to belong, Jeremiah had taken her in as his family.

Reagan remembered how she told him once that all she ever did was reverse wishing. She was afraid of even hoping for something. It seemed easier to just wish bad things wouldn't happen. Now, at twenty-one, she wished for a world of things, but the top of the list was that he'd never leave her.

"Reagan?" Brandon Biggs poked his head in the door. "You still awake?"

She stepped from the window into the milky light surrounding her uncle's bed. "I'm here, Big." Sometime over the summer she'd begun calling him what all his construction friends called him. She had no idea if the nickname was simply a short version of his last name or an adjective of description. Both fit, and the name seemed to stick. Brandon Biggs was simply Big to all who met him now.

"Did you eat any supper?" He tried to slip his big frame into the room, as if opening the door wider might set off some alarm. The muscular thug who'd bullied her when she'd first tried to fit in at Harmony High was gone, replaced by a mountain of a friend.

"I don't think I've eaten anything today except a doughnut the nurse gave me," she answered, knowing that he'd probably already guessed, for he held a bag in each hand.

At six-feet-seven and almost three hundred pounds, Big never slipped anywhere, but he tried his best to tiptoe in his work boots toward her. He set the bags down in the big windowsill designed to hold flowers and cards. Then, without a word, he circled her waist with his hands and lifted her up onto the ledge.

They would have made an odd couple if they dated, him so big and her so small. He was a construction foreman and she ran her uncle's tiny apple orchard business while finishing her degree from an online college, but somehow they worked as friends. Maybe because they'd both been knocked around as kids, but they believed in each other. She saw the good in him, and he saw the strength in her.

Reagan crossed her legs and smiled as he handed her a cheeseburger. "You got these from Buffalo's bar, I'm guessing. What would you have done if I'd already had dinner?"

"I'd eat them both. And of course I got them at Buffalo's. It's the only place open this late that makes a burger worth eating, but right after I turned my order in, you wouldn't believe the fight that broke out."

Reagan unwrapped her food and asked, "You get involved?" Big was made of muscle. Someone in a fight might get hurt just running into him by accident.

He shook his head. "I was just there to look after Beau and Border. They were playing tonight. Damn, if they're not getting as good as any of those singers on *American Idol*." After taking a quarter of the burger for his first bite, he added, "I might have been tempted to step in, but I knew you'd give me hell if I did, so I just moved over by the band cage and made sure Border could keep playing. One guy came flying from the fight and hit the chicken wire so hard it reminded me of a bug hitting the windshield. I thought about hitting him a few times for scaring the boys trying to play, but I just tossed him back into the fight."

He might be more than double her size, but part of Reagan had always felt like she was his mother. He seemed to live his life by what she'd think of him. She was proud of the way he watched over his little brother, Border, and how he checked in on his grandmother every weekend even when he was volunteering as a fireman.

The big guy leaned against the window frame and told her the details of the bar fight. With her on the ledge, they were eye to eye as they talked and ate. He asked about her uncle, interested in the details of his condition. She liked talking to Big. It wasn't as good as talking to Noah Mc-Allen, but it was close.

Finally, he stuffed his trash in one of the bags and said, "I got to go, Reagan. I promised I'd circle by and pick up the boys' equipment after the bar closes. I'm not sure how, but the boys both managed to

get a date tonight. Two giggly girls wanted to take them out to eat breakfast at the truck stop when they finished the last set.”

“If the girls were in the bar, they’re older women.” Reagan laughed, knowing that Beau Yates couldn’t be more than eighteen or nineteen and Border Biggs maybe a year older. The sheriff told her once that the only way she’d let them play at Buffalo’s was if they stayed in the cage and out of the bar. “Beau Yates stutters when he talks to me or any girl near his age. Two bar babes will probably scare him to death.”

Big shrugged. “I don’t know, maybe older women will teach those two something. All Beau thinks about is playing that guitar, and Border doesn’t bother to shower until I yell at him. I’m no more than a mother hen with two homely chicks. Beau Yates never goes home, and half the time I’m not sure he can see through all that hair. His folks should probably pay me child support for all the meals I feed him.”

“You like him around,” Reagan cut in. “He’s a good influence on Border.”

“Yeah, but he might as well be living with us. His old man hates the idea of his only son playing in a band and gives him hell. Beau’s always telling me no one knows how to give out hell like a preacher. Beau says Border’s got it easy living with me.”

Reagan touched Big’s rough cheek. “You’re a good big brother, Brandon Biggs.”

He smiled. “I’d better be. I’m all he’s got. We fight from time to time, but we both know what we got now is far better than what we had at home with our mom always high and some boyfriend of hers around reminding us to disappear.”

Big Biggs lifted her from the window.

She walked him out the door to the elevator. “Thanks for bringing me supper. I hate to leave Uncle Jeremiah for more than a few minutes.”

He looked like he wanted to hug her, but she crossed her arms and he seemed to understand. “I’ll come by tomorrow. Call me if you need anything.”

“I will. Thanks.”

He stepped on the elevator and she waved, already backing down the hall toward her uncle. When she stepped into the shadowy room, Reagan moved to her computer and checked her e-mail.

Nothing from Noah. He’d ridden in a rodeo in Kansas tonight for big money. If he’d won, he would have called or e-mailed. Noah McAllen had made pro, just like his dad. The whole town was proud of him. Everyone in Harmony wanted him to go all the way. Everyone except Reagan. She just wanted him home in one piece. She felt she was in a love triangle. She loved Noah and Noah loved the rodeo.

Closing her laptop, she reached for a blanket and snuggled into the recliner. She fell asleep as the sound of the machines blended with the beat of the howling wind tapping against the window.

Chapter 4

Truck Stop

Beau Yates couldn't believe he was sitting in a truck stop after midnight with a woman who wasn't wearing a bra. He grinned at Border, his best friend. Beau had no trouble reading Border Biggs's mind.

In all the months they'd been playing at the Buffalo Bar and Grill, no one had tried to pick them up. Now, he was sitting right here with two groupies and they couldn't stop chattering about how wonderfully he played and how they loved his songs. Border's girl even kept patting on him and holding his arm like she was afraid he might get away. Every time she leaned close to him, her big bust brushed his arm and Border looked like a pup having his tummy rubbed.

Beau's date seemed more interested in adding another coat of makeup. She talked nonstop, but he wasn't sure her ears worked. She also had the hiccups. Every time she hiccupped, both women laughed. After a dozen times, Beau had trouble seeing the humor and couldn't even manage to smile.

The women were probably four or five years older than them, not as pretty as they'd been in bar light, and maybe a little drunker than they were when they'd asked if the band would like to go to breakfast. But, all in all, this wasn't bad.

This was like a date. No better, the girls were paying. Between school and practice Beau and Border didn't have enough time or money to date, even though they'd spent hours talking about it.

"How did you boys get together and form the band?" the woman whose name sounded like some kind of fancy candy asked.

Border shrugged. "He was the only person who talked to me when I transferred here from Bailee. My big brother got a job in construction and asked me to come live with him a few years ago. I took about a second to think it over and pack."

The hiccupping girl sounded off again and her friend chimed in with a laugh.

"I-I taught him to play," Beau added to the answer before Border told his life story. The girls didn't look like they were into details or even long sentences.

“I love the way you play,” the one next to Border said, rubbing against his arm. “Do you have tattoos just on your hands, or all over?”

Both women giggled.

Border nodded like a bobblehead. He wasn’t used to girls talking to him. He was a younger model of his big brother, Brandon “Big” Biggs, but Border shaved his head and had been collecting tattoos as a hobby since he was sixteen and could pass for eighteen.

“What did you say the name of the band is?” his girl asked between hiccups.

“T-the P-partners.” Beau answered, fighting down his stutter. As an only child, he blamed his parents for his not being able to talk to girls. If he’d had a sister, maybe they wouldn’t seem so frightening, or if his father hadn’t given him weekly sermons on the evils of females, or if he’d had time to date at fifteen like most guys he knew, maybe he could at least talk.

“I think that’s cute that you two are partners,” Border’s date said, then began repeating “The Partners, the Partners” over and over, as if her brain had gotten stuck.

The waitress, a girl who’d been in Beau’s senior class, slung four midnight breakfast specials down on the table and frowned at Beau. He dove into the food, irritated that he cared one way or the other what Willow Renalls thought of him.

The girls picked at their food and complained about the truck stop not serving alcohol. Border’s date seemed to be fascinated with the condiment basket that came with breakfast. She put butter and honey on her toast, syrup on her sausage, ketchup and hot sauce on her eggs, and grape jelly all over one pancake while going on and on about how she loved breakfast.

Beau broke into their rant as he moved the basket of little packets away from her. “W-we also play over in C-Clinton once a month and by C-Christmas we p-plan to have a few nights lined up in Amarillo.”

The girls giggled, and Beau guessed either he’d gone too deep into conversation or they’d noticed he was afraid of them. The one next to him began circling smiley faces across her pancake, and the one beside Border started patting Border on the head. Her hands were so sticky, they stuck every few pats.

Border tried to push her away as he ate. Her breasts bumping against his arm seemed to no longer hold his interest now that food was on the table, or maybe Border had finally looked up to his date’s face and didn’t like what he saw. She had that kind of puffy round face that’s pretty in the spring of a girl’s life, and for her it seemed a very short spring. The dark circles painted around her eyes and the bloodred lipstick didn’t help.

Beau ate his free meal and tried to think of something shallow

enough to say.

The girls found it first. They both decided they had to go pee. Beau's date stumbled getting out of the booth and drew everyone's attention, even the waitress. Then she asked everyone she passed where the potty was while her friend urged, "Hurry," as they moved along.

Once they were gone, Beau looked at his best friend . . . his only friend. "You want to get out of here?"

"Hell, yes." Border shoved half his scrambled eggs into his mouth. "Even if we got lucky with those two, I have a feeling we'd be waking up itching in the morning."

Beau laughed. "Go outside and call your brother's cell and ask him to come out and pick us up. It's two miles back to town." Beau didn't like the idea of walking back in the dark, but it seemed better than staying here. "Don't come back in. I'll tell them you're sick. After I think your brother should have had time to get here, I'll say I'm going to check on you."

"What if they don't believe you, or worse, want to see how I'm doing? It'll take my brother several minutes to drive out."

"Then we run." Beau tried to smile. "And pray your brother reaches us before the two run us down. I have a feeling they won't be happy when we disappear."

While Border vanished out the front door, Beau pulled out a ten he kept hidden in the back of his wallet and put it under his plate. The women would probably pay before they left, but he doubted they'd leave a tip and he didn't like the thought that Willow would have to clean up this mess.

Ten minutes later, Beau stepped outside. Border was already in his brother's truck, but Beau stood in the dark and glanced back into the window. The two dates were still giggling as they slung scrambled eggs at each other. "I'll never do that again," he swore to himself.

The only thing he'd done right tonight was leave the tip. The rest of the evening, even the kiss in the car on the way out, he wished he could forget.

Chapter 5

Harmony County Hospital

Tinch Turner woke slowly. He was still on the examining table, but someone had pulled up the sides as if fearing he'd fall off. They'd also dimmed the lights and covered him with a white blanket. He wouldn't be surprised if Georgia hadn't taken care of him while he was out. She was sneaky like that. Women with hearts were hard to stay mad at.

Touching his head, he felt the stitches running just below his hairline as he sat up. Most of his aches felt warmed over, as if he'd been in so many fights they all just started hurting again when some new wound came along.

"You feeling better?" the doctor in white asked as she stepped into the room. Blood, probably his, now stained her lab coat.

Without the blood in his eyes, he could see her clearly. Tall, very tall for a woman, with high cheekbones and light hair. "I'm fine. Thanks for stitching me up, Doc." With her starched coat and fair skin he decided she could pass for an angel.

"No problem. You're free to go. I'm guessing from what Nurse Veasey said, you have a charge card on file."

Tinch watched her, not knowing if she was trying to be funny. She didn't look like the type. She was all business and proper. The kind of woman who'd never even talk to him unless she had to.

He stood slowly, feeling his body ache with each movement. When he finally faced her, he found himself looking into pale gray eyes. "I'll be . . ."

The room began to spin and he leaned forward.

The doc caught him and pushed him back against the table. "I don't think you'd better drive, Mr. Turner. I'll have the nurse call whoever you want to come get you, or I could check you in for the night. We've got a few rooms open in maternity."

Georgia stepped in the room and helped him lie back down. He closed his eyes and willed the world to settle. "Thanks, Doc," he managed to say calmly, "but I'm not spending the night. Not in this place."

"Who should I call, Tinch?" Georgia sounded concerned.

"No one. I'll be all right in a minute. I can drive. Give me a minute

and I'll walk out of here."

"I don't think so. If Dr. Spencer says you need someone to drive you, we're not letting you go until her orders are filled." Georgia had that general stance about her that hinted she would fight if need be.

Tinch would have laughed if he could have. Two women wouldn't stop him. No one ever stopped him from doing whatever he wanted to do. "I got to go home." He decided to try reason first. Too bad it must have dripped out with his blood.

Georgia patted his arm, but her words were for the doctor. "You rented that place way out on Timber Line Road, didn't you, Doctor?"

She waited for the doctor to nod, then added, "Tinch lives in the only other house out that direction."

When the doctor didn't comment, Georgia set her plan. "You could give him a lift. He's just down the road."

Tinch opened one eye enough to see the doc shake her head.

"I'm not sure it would be the safe thing to do," she said.

Georgia laughed. "He's not dangerous to anyone but himself. You'd be safer driving him than being in a car with him on the road."

"I don't need a ride," he said, wondering if he could manage to stand and make it to his truck before he passed out. He'd slept there before; he could do it again. "I'm not sure I'd be safe with the doc."

"Don't be ridiculous, Tinch." Georgia was in no mood to listen. "If you're not going to take a room for the night, someone has got to drive you home."

Dr. Spencer looked like she'd been asked to pick up a stray dog on a busy highway. "All right," she frowned. "I'll pull my car up if you'll wheel him out. You're right, he'd be a danger on the road."

She was gone before he could argue, so he turned on Georgia. "I don't need or want any help. I'm fine."

Georgia pulled a wheelchair from the corner and helped him into it. "I'm not taking responsibility for you passing out and running off in a ditch. Let someone help you, Tinch, before it's too late."

Tinch fought down nausea. "That Dr. Spencer didn't look too excited about playing Good Samaritan, Georgia."

"The doc doesn't like men, any men from what I can see, so you be polite to her. If she snubs the rich ones who come by to flirt with her, you can imagine what she must think of the bottom-of-a-barrel ones like you."

"Thanks for the compliment." He frowned. He'd never considered himself in any barrel, much less at the bottom of one. He'd loved Lori Anne since they were in middle school and never really cared one way or the other what any other girl thought of him.

"You smell like whiskey and look like something the cat wouldn't drag in." Georgia was on a roll. "I bet you didn't even clean up before

you came to town. You got dirt under your fingernails and horse shit still on your boots." She pushed him toward the doors. "I swear, Tinch, germs wouldn't even live on you."

"You finished?" he asked, figuring he probably deserved anything she said. She'd guessed right about him not cleaning up. He'd worked with the horses until dark, then climbed in his truck and headed to town for a few drinks.

"No, I'm not finished," she answered as she shoved him outside. "Lori Anne died three years ago, and nothing is going to bring her back. It's time you got on with your life."

Tinch didn't hate Georgia. He hated the whole world. No one seemed to understand. He didn't have a life to go on with without Lori Anne. She'd been his best friend through school, his lover as soon as they both turned sixteen, and his wife the winter after they'd both graduated from high school. With his parents dead, Lori Anne had been his friend, his lover, his wife, his family, his world. When she'd died of cancer, she'd left him hollow and alone. She left him with nothing inside or out.

He stood as a tiny BMW pulled up to the curb. "How am I supposed to get in that thing? It looks like she drove it off a bumper car ride." He leaned down to see the doctor at the wheel glaring at him. "I've seen toys in kids' meals bigger than this thing."

Georgia opened the door and helped him in. "You're going, so stop complaining unless you want to sleep in the maternity ward."

"No thanks." He swore as he folded into a pretzel and Georgia shoved.

As he leaned back in the seat, the nurse patted his arm again. "I'm sorry, Tinch, but it's time someone said something to you. All your friends are worried about you."

She closed the door without hearing him say, "Tell all my friends to go to hell."

Thank goodness, the doctor didn't say a word as she drove away from the hospital. He caught a glance of her in the fading light. A statue of starch and ice, he decided. Strange that such a cold woman would pick a profession like doctor, or maybe it was just him she was so cold toward.

She didn't ask which house was his. She just drove through the night as he leaned back and wished everything and everyone would go away.

When she pulled up in front of his place, she stopped and said, "You need any help getting in?"

"No," he snapped as he fumbled for the door.

It took every ounce of his concentration to make it out of the car and up the steps. He heard her drive away as he opened the door and

moved inside.

Tinch made it two more feet before he crumbled to his knees. He didn't cry or scream or cuss. He just leaned forward, his head in his hands, and wished for the thousandth time that he could stop breathing.

A mile away Addison pulled her BMW into the dilapidated garage and walked across the darkened yard to the house she'd rented. As always, she'd forgotten to leave the porch light on. Her only excuse was she'd never lived anywhere but the city. She'd never known such blackness on moonless nights before.

Her body felt numb, she was so tired. When she stepped on the porch, she looked back south toward Tinch Turner's house. She could barely make out the outline of his place against the sky. He hadn't turned on a light either. Maybe, like her, he liked the shadows now and then. Stepping inside, she walked across the living room and into her bedroom, stripping off clothes as she moved. By the time she bumped into her bed, she wore only a T-shirt and panties as she tumbled into the unmade bed she'd left almost twenty-four hours before.

"Sleep," she whispered, knowing that tonight, finally, she would.

Hours later, a knock on her door woke her. For a minute, Addison couldn't figure out where she was, and then she told herself she was safe. She was in control of her own life. No one was pushing her. Her family didn't even know where she lived.

When the knock came again, she wrapped a blanket around her shoulders and went to find the noise.

A tall man wearing a western shirt, well-worn and well-fitting jeans, and a cowboy hat stood on her porch. Without the blood and dirt, she almost didn't recognize Tinch Turner, the bothersome neighbor she'd treated last night. The thought crossed her mind not to answer, but since she hadn't even latched the screen door last night, and the wooden door stood wide open, it would have been hard to act like she wasn't home. All he had to do was turn around and he'd see her standing on the other side of the screen.

While she thought about what to do, he shifted and she couldn't help but think that he was a man built in balance. He was tall, but not lanky, slim, but not thin, with shoulders that looked strong from work and not from pumping iron. He might spend his nights drinking and getting into fights, but he spent his days outside.

Before she could move, he turned and faced her.

She froze, unsure what to do.

His piercing blue eyes drank her in with a slow movement from her toes to her hair.

"What are you doing here?" Addison pulled the blanket closer, as if

it offered her some protection.

"I came to say I'm sorry for not thanking you for bringing me home last night." He smiled, showing straight white teeth, which surprised her. If he'd really been in as many fights as Nurse Veasey claimed, he should have been toothless by now.

"Forget it." She expected him to turn away, but he didn't move. Maybe her one neighbor was one too many, Addison thought.

He finally shifted. "I was wondering if I could ride into town with you next time you go. I need to pick up my truck. Ten miles is a little far to walk."

"Why don't you call someone?" She didn't want to get to know Tinch Turner. They had nothing in common, nothing to talk about. With her work schedule she didn't have time to make friends, and the last thing she wanted was a man in her life. Between a demanding father still trying to direct her life and the memory of a husband from her teens who'd used her as a punching bag, she'd had enough.

"I don't have a phone," he said. "Never needed one until today."

The idea that someone might not have a phone, even a cell phone, was out of her realm of reasoning. She'd gotten her first phone when she was in grade school and carried a cell since high school. "How'd you get to my porch?"

"I walked. I don't think it's a mile between my house and yours. If you skip the road and head across the field, it's not even that far. When the Rogerses lived here, they'd always ring that bell if they needed me and I'd run over." He pointed to the corner of the porch as if she might not have noticed the huge bell mounted on the railing. "Course, they were both hard of hearing, so I always said I'd fire off a shot and hit the bell if I needed them."

Addison thought of slamming the door. She didn't have time for small talk. "Look." She decided to be direct. "You woke me up. I worked a twenty-hour shift and I'm not due back till noon." She felt for her watch, trying to remember where she'd left it. "What time is it, anyway?"

"Noon," he said. "I figured you'd be awake."

"Oh no!" She looked past him at the cloudy day. If she'd been guessing, she would have thought it was closer to dawn.

Running toward the bedroom, she yelled over her shoulder. "I'll be ready in ten minutes. You can ride along, but I've got to get to the hospital fast. I'm already on duty."

Addison showered, pulled on clean clothes, and walked out of her bedroom with her hair still wet.

If she'd thought about it, she might have guessed she'd find Tinch Turner waiting on the porch for her.

Though all the shutters were open, she saw no sign of him outside,

or on the porch. Shrugging, she decided he wasn't her problem.

One step more and she halted. The cowboy was standing in her kitchen, a tea towel tucked into his jeans like an apron and his hat pushed back.

"What do you think you're doing?" Anger and panic warred inside her. He was in her house! She knew he was wild, probably violent and possibly crazy.

"Well, Doc, I couldn't find much in the way of real food, but I made you an egg sandwich."

"You're cooking?" It seemed a strange thing to do before he killed her, but Addison had slept through the few psych classes she'd taken.

"I figured you'd want to eat something before you go." He raised an eyebrow. "You planning on leaving with a wet head?"

"Look, Mr. Turner. I'm not your problem and I'm leaving." Addison rushed toward her purse. "If you want a ride, you'd better be in the car when I back out of the garage."

She knew she was probably overreacting, but she'd had all she wanted of him or any controlling man, and if he was insane, she had pepper spray in her purse. *Somewhere!*

"I don't need someone worrying about my hair or if I'm eating," she said as she kept looking and tried not to sound panicky. "I am none of your concern. I can take care of myself, and I moved here with the nearest neighbor a mile away for a reason."

She wouldn't have been surprised if he'd yelled at her and stormed out, and she wouldn't care. He'd stepped over the line when he'd stepped into her house.

Gripping the spray can in a death grip, she hurried for the door.

He met her there, the egg sandwich in his hand.

She raised the pepper spray and widened her stance, then looked up into laughing eyes.

"Sorry, Doc." He held the door for her as he wrapped the sandwich in a paper towel, unaware she'd been ready for an attack.

With a huff, she stormed past him.

"I'm guessing you're not a morning person," he said, matching her long strides to the garage.

When she glared at him across the hood and opened her mouth, he added, "I know, none of my concern."

She didn't look at him as she started the car and drove toward town. He had the good sense not to say a word. He just sat, his shoulder almost touching hers in the small car, and ate the egg sandwich.

When she pulled into the parking lot, he climbed out and yelled, "Thanks for the ride," as she rushed away.

An hour later, when she told Georgia Veasey about how he'd

walked right into her house and made himself at home in the kitchen, Georgia laughed.

“Tinch grew up on that land. I’m guessing he’s been walking into the Rogers house all his life.”

“It’s my place now,” Addison said. “And from now on I’m keeping the doors locked. If I never see Tinch Turner again, it’ll be too soon.”

Georgia shrugged. “When he comes in to get the stitches removed, I’ll take care of him. He’s a good man on bad times. You might want to get to know him.”

“Thanks, but I’m not looking for a man, period.” Addison had never said anything to anyone in Harmony about being married in her teens or how her father’s determination to direct her life had driven her to Harmony, but Nurse Veasey must have sensed something was broken inside her, and she’d been kind enough not to rush in and try to fix it.

Georgia had offered her friendship without strings. She’d probably noticed that Addison lived at the hospital and slept at a rented house she had leased fully furnished. She had no social life except dinner after work with Georgia and her husband now and then.

When Addison got home that night, she found a loaf of bread and a dozen eggs on her porch. No note. He knew she’d know who they were from. It wasn’t a peace offering, it was simply replacing what he’d taken.

She looked to the south and saw a single light shining in the barn beside his house. Somehow the light made her feel even more alone than she already was, but alone was a great deal better than the hell of her marriage or living closer to her father.

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